THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

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THE MIND-SWEEPER AFFAIR

A New **NAPOLEON SOLO** and **ILLYA KURYAKIN** Novel by
ROBERT HART DAVIS

PIGMY ISLAND

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THE MIND-SWEEPER AFFAIR

THE NEW COMPLETE "U.N.C.LE." NOVEL

It was a house of madness, peopled by men who knew Evil not wisely but too well. Somewhere inside there Solo and Illya must find and destroy a devil's monster that lay bare men's very souls—before it destroyed them!

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

ACT I—TO SLEEP, PERCHANCE TO DREAM

ANAGUA is the capital of Caragua. The war department building is in the center of the city. On a night in May, at about eight o'clock in the evening, a sergeant of the national army walked quietly along the corridors until he came to an office marked: *Major General L. G. Dachado*.

The sergeant stopped for a moment in front of the door, looked up and down the corridor, then leaned his ear against the closed door. Satisfied, he walked on to the next door, which was plain and unmarked. Again checking to see if he was alone, he produced a key, opened the unmarked door, and stepped inside, shutting the door quickly behind him.

The room the sergeant stood in was dark. Windowless, it had no lights on. The sergeant waited for a moment until his eyes were accustomed to the .dark. Then he stepped quickly across the room to a wall of shelves that held office supplies.

The sergeant removed a stack of paper, took a small contact microphone out of his pocket, and pressed it against the wall behind shelves.

The sergeant remained in that listening position for an hour. The telephone rang several times in the office of General Dachado. The sergeant listened, but showed no interest. As the first hour passed, he shifted his position a couple of times, lit another cigarette, and went on listening.

Ten more minutes passed, and the telephone rang again in the other office. The sergeant came alert, dropped his cigarette and stamped it out. The ringing of the telephone this time had a different sound, as if muffled. A drawer opened, and then the sergeant began to listen intently.

A moment later the sergeant put his microphone into his pocket, stepped away from the shelves, and moved silently to the door between the storeroom and the office of General Dachado. He took a strange looking pistol from his pocket, changed the clip in its hand grip for another clip he took from his pocket, and opened the door soundlessly. He peered through the opening.

A tall, skinny man with a long drooping mustache and a dark complexion was at the desk with his back to the storeroom door. The sergeant saw General Dachado talking on a telephone he had taken from the bottom drawer of his desk. Obviously a special telephone, since two other instruments stood on the top of the desk. And the general was not talking—he was listening.

As he listened, Dachado wrote on a pad of paper in front of him. The hidden sergeant watched the whole scene. There was no one else in the office. At last Dachado stopped writing, nodded to the telephone as if whoever he was talking to could see him, muttered something that was more than a grunt than a word, and hung up. The general looked at what he had written for a moment, then replaced the private telephone in the desk drawer, locked it, and stood up.

The sergeant opened the door of the storeroom, raised his odd pistol, and something seemed to spit in the room. The general clutched at his neck, half-turned, and collapsed to the floor.

The sergeant stepped quickly into the room. He bent over and took the piece of paper from the general's hand. It was the message Dachado had written

down while listening to the telephone. The sergeant stood above the fallen man and read the paper. The only sound in the room was Dachado's labored and shallow breathing under the influence of the drugged pellet the sergeant had shot him with.

Nothing moved as the sergeant read the paper carefully. Then the outer door of Dachado's office burst open.

A masked man in civilian clothes jumped into the room. There was a pistol in his hand. The attacker shot the sergeant. There was no sound, just a short, guttural bark like a sharp cough.

The sergeant was knocked backwards.

The attacker jumped in toward the piece of paper that the sergeant had dropped. For an instant his silenced pistol was aimed away from the crumpled man.

With a burst of strength, the wounded sergeant threw himself on his attacker. The sergeant knocked his attacker down and staggered out the open door into the corridor.

On the floor of the office the attacker lay stunned for a moment. Then he jumped up and was about to go after the sergeant when he stopped, turned, and picked up the paper again. He read it quickly but carefully, dropped it again, and went out the open door.

The sergeant staggered on along the dim corridors of the silent building. Once he stopped, leaned against the wall, and looked back at the trail of blood. He shook his head. Then he took off his jacket and pressed it against the ugly wound in his chest. He held the jacket tight against the wound and staggered on.

He grew weaker as he went, but he no longer left a trail of blood. He reached, at last, a cross corridor at the far end of the building. He turned left and came to another unmarked door. He opened it. A small closet was behind the door. He went in, closed the door, and sat among brooms and mops in the dark.

The sergeant took a pencil from his pocket. His movements were slow, painful. At last he had the pencil in his hand, a tiny thread sticking up from the top of the pencil like the antenna of some insect. The sergeant bent his face close to the pencil.

"Control… local. Control... local... come in. This is Agent Forty-Four, come in... Agent Forty-Four…"

Another voice, soft and faint, was in the closet.

"Control local. Report Agent Forty-Four. This is control local."

"Agent... Forty-Four," the sergeant said, his breath coming in gasps. "June seventeenth. Repeat, June seventeenth. Dachado had a call... private telephone… full details of time and place… June seventeenth was the date of..."

The door of the closet burst open. The sergeant made a feeble effort to raise his pistol.

Framed in the open door the masked attacker shot twice.

The sergeant lay dead among the brooms and mops.

The masked attacker ground the pencil-radio beneath his foot and turned away without a glance at his victim.

The building became silent again.

TWO

IN THE COMPLEX of closely guarded rooms and corridors behind and above Del Floria's Tailoring Shop on the East Side of New York near the United Nations that was the headquarters of *The United Network for Law and Enforcement*, the female assistant to the Chief of Communications Section listened to the message coming in from far to the south.

She spun dials and the message, picked up by the concealed antenna in the billboard on top of the building, came quick and urgent.

When her radio finally went silent, she touched a button on the console. Moments later a door opened by itself and a pair of young men stepped into the room. They looked like college boys. They were neat, well-groomed and young. But the pistols in their hands indicated that they were not college boys.

"Urgent. To Mr. Waverly direct," the communications girl said.

The two men nodded. One took the message. The other stood to one side with his pistol ready. The message was in a sealed envelope. Neither of the young men even glanced at the envelope. They acted as if they were aware of being watched constantly. They *were* being watched—this was how young men who wanted to be U.N.C.L.E. agents started: carrying important data between departments inside U.N.C.L.E. head quarters. Messengers and the lowest level of internal security.

The two young men walked from the communications room and along a bright grey corridor that had no visible lights, no windows, and rows of doors without locks or knobs. They walked single file, even inside their own security, alert, pistols ready. It was this unceasing vigilance that, in the last analysis, accounted for the efficiency of U.N.CL.E. Never relax your guard or your brain, not even in your own headquarters. Anyone could be a spy, and the enemy was resourceful.

The two young men waited before an unmarked door at the extreme end of a corridor. Unseen cameras scanned them in a matter of seconds. Electronic sensors analyzed them, smelled them, and approved them. The door slid open and the two men entered a small and simple office. An alert young woman looked at them.

"Priority One, Top Security message for Section I," one of the young men said.

"I'll take it for Mr. Waverly. He—" the young woman began.

"No," the young man said. "The message must be delivered into the hands of Section I members only."

The woman smiled, pressed a button, waited. Another door opened behind her. A man stepped through. A man who looked like nothing but an aristocratic bloodhound wearing sloppy tweeds, smoking an unlighted pipe, and who had flat, innocent eyes and shaggy but neat hair. Unsmiling, the man raised a bushy grey eyebrow and spoke quietly in a clipped, slow, almost bumbling voice.

"Yes, gentlemen?"

The young man with the message handed it to the man. Alexander Waverly, Section-I member of U.N.C.L.E. and Chief of all operations in the Western Hemisphere, took the message. The two young men left without a word. Waverly opened the envelope. Then his heavy eyebrows frowned, and he turned and walked back into his inner office.

The door slid shut behind him. He stood for a moment in the spartan office with its windows overlooking the city, and its com pact electronic complex that kept him in touch with each part of his headquarters and most of the world operations. Then he sighed heavily and went to his desk. He shook his grey head, and looked at the two men who sat at a round table watching him.

"Colonel Forsyte," Waverly said.

"There's no doubt?" the smaller of the two men said. His shock of blond hair rested like a halo above quick, bright eyes and a Slavic face. His sensitive mouth framed his words in a clipped British accent. "The colonel is a man with almost a perfect record."

"An absolutely perfect record," the taller of the two who sat at the table said. A slender man of medium height, he looked like a successful junior executive who had had a slightly too easy youth. Which was a complete fraud. Behind the faintly callow exterior was the mind of a trained agent and the skill and muscles of a commando.

"I've checked him out," the taller man, Napoleon Solo, went on. "Not a hint of treason. Not even the chance, really."

"A sleeper, perhaps, Napoleon?" the smaller man, Illya Kuryakin, said.

"How?" Solo said. The Chief Enforcement Agent of U.N.C.L.E.'S Section-II narrowed his usually humorous eyes. "His background is absolutely known all the way back, and he's no fake."

"Private troubles?" Illya said.

"The man's almost a monk, my suspicious Russian," Solo said.

Waverly watched his two best agents. He said nothing, but let them talk. At last he coughed, began to search in his pockets for a match with which to light his pipe.

"Mr. Solo is quite correct. There is no hint that Colonel Forsyte is a spy or traitor," Waverly said quietly, his fingers still searching for a match. "Nevertheless, Colonel Forsyte is the man. As we all know, gentlemen, the test was fool-proof. Of the five men, only Forsyte was given the date of June seventeenth, and that is the date our man in Anagua has just reported."

Waverly found a match and lit his pipe. Solo and Illya were silent. At last Illya Kuryakin spoke.

"So far data on five secret documents have somehow leaked from the defense department," the small Russian said slowly. "In London and Ottawa, similar secrets have been leaked. In all cases the data was known only to the most trusted personnel. Not a hint of treason or espionage has been found against any of the men involved in any case. No single man was in possession of all the secrets. Counter-espionage has found no suspicious actions. Yet the data is leaking."

"Yes," Waverly said, sucking on his pipe. Smoke curled to the ceiling. "Which is why we set up this test, as we all know. The date of the Organization of American States meeting to consider Communist infiltration of the Caraguan army was something we knew General Dachado

would want to know. That fact would be known to anyone stealing defense department secrets.

"Each of the five men was given a different date. As you know, each of the five had been present at at least two other meetings where information leaked. All are career men with perfect records. We hoped that Dachado would not get the data. But he has, gentlemen, and the date was June seventeenth—the date we gave Colonel Forsyte."

Illya's deep eyes frowned. "I followed Forsyte myself. He did nothing in any way suspicious. His normal routine. He did not talk to a single stranger. In fact, he talked to no one unusual in the day since he had the data."

"Did you ever lose him?" Solo said.

"I never lose a man I'm following, Napoleon," Illya said.

"Then we missed something," Solo said. "Or you did. He must have passed the data to someone else. You can't leak data into thin air and have it get to Anagua."

Illya nodded. "I agree. He must have some transfer set-up so good I failed to see it."

Waverly blew smoke. "Perhaps, Mr. Kuryakin. That is a definite possibility. However, there is something about all this I find disturbing. Something decidedly odd, and that makes me definitely uneasy. Colonel Forsyte is not a spy. I stake my career on that."

"One can't always know what pressures will change a man," Illya said quietly.

"Of course not; I quite agree," Waverly said. "Still, I do not like it. Forsyte has far more important data in his possession. Really vital data that has not been leaked. He has had such data for many, many years and it has never leaked. Now, suddenly, the secrets are slipping out as if on wings."

"And not just here," Solo pointed out.

"No, not just here," Waverly said. The Section-I Chief frowned under his bushy brows. "Have you noticed one strange aspect, though? The data that has leaked has no pattern. It is rather random information. That is true in the reports from London and Ottawa. Some is important, some trivial, relative1y speaking."

"And it leaked consecutively, not at the same time," Solo pointed out. "First London, then Ottawa, now here."

"Precisely," Waverly agreed. "Once the leaking began in Ottawa, it ceased in London. Once it started here, it ceased in Ottawa."

"As if whoever is getting the data is working alone, and moved from London to Ottawa to New York," Illya said. "Some big and clever free-lance spy?"

"It has the pattern," Waverly agreed. "Gentlemen, what do we do?"

"Increase our observation of Forsyte," Solo said. "One thing I'm sure of is that you can't transmit data without a contact with someone else. And whoever it is, he's probably still in New York."

"I'm not so sure, Mr. Solo," Waverly said. "I'm afraid our report from Anagua had some bad news. Agent Forty-Four was killed while he was transmitting his message. His body was found in the war department building. Dachado is keeping it quiet, but our information says that he was not killed by Dachado or his men. Our people think there is clear evidence of some third force being involved."

"The spies?" Solo said.

"It seems the logical conclusion. Except for the fact that Dachado took the information on the telephone. Agent Forty-Four reported that much. It seems odd that the spies would make the report by telephone, and then appear moments later to kill Agent Forty- Four."

There was a silence.

"Someone else trying to move in?" Solo said.

"Again, it has the sound," Waverly said. "But we can't be sure. We must be sure. We must know who is getting and transmitting the data—and how."

"Before a third party finds out," Illya said.

"Yes, that particularly," Waverly said. "I think you both had better start watching Colonel Walter Forsyte very closely. Find out how a man can transmit secret data through thin air."

The two agents looked at each other.

THREE

COLONEL WALTER FORSYTE left his house in suburban Manhasset just before eight o'clock the next morning. He stepped into his car, and drove alone directly to the city. He did not notice the blue Mercedes sports car that followed him. Nor did he notice the small man in black on a motorcycle who rode most of the way just in front of him.

Illya Kuryakin, on the motorcycle, and Napoleon Solo, in the Mercedes, worked as the well-oiled team they were, keeping in constant verbal contact with their small radios no one could tell they were using. Illya, on the motorcycle, never took his eyes off the road ahead, or the mirror that showed Forsyte's car behind, as he talked.

"He hasn't even noticed us, Napoleon."

In the Mercedes, Solo had the best view of the colonel up ahead in his car.

"No. He acts like a man who never heard of being followed," Solo said.

Illya evaded a bump in the parkway. "Perhaps he hasn't ever thought about it, Napoleon. Or he's a fine actor."

Solo speeded up to pass a truck and keep Forsyte within his sight. "Or he's so confident of his methods he doesn't care if anyone watches him."

"No method of passing information can be that good," Illya said with Forsyte clear in his rear mirror. The colonel was driving easily, smiling and apparently whistling to himself.

"Hypnosis?" Solo said from the Mercedes.

"How?" Illya said from the motorcycle. "We've been watching him since he had the information. Or you have. Was he ever out of your sight long enough to be hypnotized?"

"No," Solo said flatly, as he watched the back of Forsyte's head in the car in front of him.

The traffic became thick as they approached the city, and the two men stopped talking to concentrate on following their man. Forsyte did not seem in any way suspicious. They plunged into the white echoing void of the Midtown Tunnel and emerged into Manhattan.

Forsyte turned north to his office in the building of the United States Mission to The United Nations. There the colonel worked as second-in-command of a special global psychological warfare team assigned to close cooperation with the State Department. Forsyte parked and entered the building and rode up in the elevator without noticing the lieutenant who was behind him and rode up in the elevator with him.

Solo, disguised as the lieutenant, faced front and gave no indication that he was interested in Forsyte. But he followed the colonel out of the elevator, to his office, and took up a previously prepared position at a desk in Forsyte's outer office where he could watch everyone who came or went.

By the rear entrance, unseen by anyone, Illya made his way up to the floor of Forsyte's office, and into a prepared closet from the hallway where a small peephole, disguised on the other side, made it possible for him to observe the man. A planted mike made the colonel's words part of the closet.

Nothing happened.

The colonel spoke to no one suspicious. No one unknown came to his office. Nothing was passed in silence or by word. No meaningful looks were exchanged in front of the eyes of Illya hidden in the closet. No letters were mailed. No signals were given either in the office or out the windows, by Forsyte or anyone else.

The colonel did not leave his office for lunch.

The afternoon was no more eventful, but it was short. Colonel Forsyte left his office for the day at three o'clock. Illya ran down from the closet to the parking area. Solo casually left the office just behind the colonel. He followed the colonel to the parking lot and saw Illya working over his motorcycle.

Solo saw something else.

Not far from Illya, to the left of the colonel's car, a tail man in a grey suit, his face turned away, was working to pile boxes into the front seat of his car —or pretending to. Because the man was actually watching the side mirror of the car. And the angle of the mirror seemed aimed at Forsyte's car!

To the right of the colonel's car a smaller man, wide and powerful, was seated on the hood of his car reading a newspaper. From time to time this man looked at his watch, and then away toward the entrance, as if he were waiting for his wife. But Solo did not think the man was waiting for anything, or anyone, except Colonel Walter Forsyte.

The colonel walked to his car. No one made a move.

The entire parking area seemed momentarily frozen into a silent paralysis.

Then Forsyte took a bundle of clothes from the rear seat of his car and turned to walk away. The colonel walked casually and easily, carrying the clothes and whistling softly to himself like a man without a care in the world and the prospect of a pleasant afternoon in front of him. He reached the halfway point to the exit before anyone moved.

Then the short, wide man jumped easily down from his car and sauntered off in the same direction as the colonel. There were many people in the parking area, but Solo had little doubt that the wide man was following the colonel. Solo glanced briefly in the general direction of Illya. The small, blond Russian touched his left ear and rubbed his hands together.

Plan One. Solo would continue with the original job, and Illya would assume the new job. In this situation that meant that Solo would follow Forsyte and Illya would follow the new men who seemed so interested in Forsyte. Solo walked out of the parking area without another glance at Illya.

Illya continued to work on his motorcycle. The tall man in the grey suit suddenly finished piling the boxes into his car, got into the car and drove out. Illya mounted the motorcycle and went off after the tall man.

Solo picked up the colonel and the muscular man a block from the colonel's office building. They were both walking west, Forsyte a half a block in front, carrying his clothes. Solo did not like how far behind he was, and he didn't want the wide man to know that he was following, so he speeded up and passed the wide man as if he had no interest in him.

The colonel turned into a dry cleaner's shop. Solo followed him in without a pause.

In the parking area Illya followed the tall man in the car out of the area and left toward Third Avenue. The man drove slowly, obviously working as a team with the wide man on foot. On Third Avenue the tall man's car turned north and double parked. The wide man was standing in front of a cleaner's shop. Illya drove on past and pulled into the curb a block ahead where he could keep his eye on the car of the tall man in front of him.

Inside the dry cleaner's, Solo got into a mild argument about his clothes—he claimed that he had forgotten his ticket and gave a phony name. While the counter man was swearing and looking through racks of clothes in the rear, Solo watched Forsyte and listened. As far as he could tell Forsyte passed no messages, and received none. The colonel was concerned only with the correct way to press his uniform

An instant before it was obvious that the colonel was about to leave, Solo told the counterman to forget his cleaning; he'd find his ticket and be back. He walked out just in front of the colonel, hesitating on the sidewalk a split second while he sensed which way the colonel would turn. He turned first and walked north.

The colonel came along behind him, and the wide man came after the colonel. The procession went on for a block. Then Solo went into a stationery store and bought a bar of candy. He came out and was now last in line. The parade continued until Solo suddenly knew where the colonel was going.

He had followed the colonel the day before, and at this exact hour he had been in the exact spot. The colonel was going to his health club. The club was one block away, to the right down a cross street, on the second floor of an old building that backed on an alley. Solo passed both the wide man and the colonel and was the first one up the stairs to the health club.

Illya, on his motorcycle, observed the parade up Third Avenue. He saw the car of the tall man take up its position following the three walking men. Illya frowned. On his motorcycle he was too conspicuous. Yet he had to keep watch on the two men, who were now definitely tailing Forsyte. He had no choice.

On the motorcycle he moved along behind the slow moving car of the tall man. His brain was working hard. Who were they, the two men following Forsyte? If they were spies who got the secret data from Forsyte, why were they following the colonel? It made no sense.

Then Illya had no more time for thinking. The car ahead turned into a cross street. Illya followed. Solo, Forsyte, and the wide man had vanished. He saw the sign of the health club. He remembered Solo's report of the colonel's activities, and guessed that the three men had gone into the health club.

The car ahead passed the entrance to the club and turned into an alley that ran beside the building. Illya followed to the alley, dismounted, parked his motorcycle, and entered the alley warily.

At the rear door of the building two men stepped out to meet the tall man who had been driving the car. Illya Kuryakin crept closer to hear them.

FOUR

NAKED, NAPOLEON SOLO wrapped a towel around his hips in the locker room of the health club, and walked toward the showers. Forsyte was already in the shower. The wide man, a mass of muscles in his towel, was under a sunlamp from where he had a clear view of the showers.

Solo had watched Forsyte register and get his basket of athletic and swim clothes. The colonel had spoken to no one, except to say hello, and had passed nothing. In the locker room Forsyte nodded to various men, but said nothing, and hummed happily as if the health club was a part of his life he specially enjoyed. Now the colonel sang in the shower and Solo joined him.

Forsyte looked at him for the first time as if he recognized him. Solo smiled, and Forsyte smiled back. The colonel returned to his shower, singing. He clearly had decided that Solo was just some member he knew on sight, or some junior from his office on the staff of some other colonel. Forsyte was not a suspicious man.

Solo watched the colonel closely. But no one approached him; he did nothing that looked like he was transmitting any information in the shower, and he had nothing on him to pass. When Forsyte finished his shower, he toweled and went toward the steam and hot rooms. Solo followed, suddenly alert—the steam room was a mass of swirling vapor. An easy place to sit almost completely hidden and pass information.

But Forsyte did not go into the steam room. He entered the hot room instead. Solo followed, and so did the wide, muscular man. In the hot room the light was bright, the air was dry and oven hot, and naked men lay all around on deck chairs. From time to time an attendant brought glasses of water. The men on the chairs sweated in rivers.

Forsyte took the only empty chair in the hot room. Solo and the muscular man looked around. As if on a signal, three of the men stood up and walked out, leaving chairs for Solo and the wide man. Solo kept one eye on Forsyte, and one on the muscular man. So far, the unknown man who was also interested in Forsyte had shown no interest in Solo.

Solo lay in the deck chair and pretended to sleep. But he watched Forsyte like a hawk from behind his half-closed eyes. The muscular man was also apparently asleep. But Forsyte wasn't asleep. The colonel read a newspaper and drank water and the sweat poured off him. Forsyte seemed to be enjoying the sweating. Every now and then he rubbed himself vigorously with a towel and continued his reading.

No one talked to Forsyte.

Nothing seemed to happen. Solo was beginning to think that whatever method Forsyte used it was very good.

Then he heard the faint sound.

It was almost imperceptible. One sound among many that came from all parts of the health club. No one else seemed to notice. A faint hum, low and outside the hot room. Solo listened to it, tried to locate its location. After a time he decided that it was coming from above—from the ceiling of the hot room, or from the floor above the health club. Probably nothing…

He stopped in mid-thought. His half-hidden eyes stared at Forsyte.

The colonel was suddenly acting strangely.

Solo watched. Forsyte had not rubbed himself in some time. The towel lay neglected on the floor. The colonel's right arm hung down, almost limp. He still held the paper, but his eyes seemed to be having trouble reading the words. Forsyte blinked a few times, shook his head as if to clear it.

Solo stared from the slits of his eyes. Forsyte rubbed his eyes, and then rubbed his forehead. The newspaper fell from his left hand and lay forgotten on his lap. Forsyte shook his head again, like a man fighting sleep.

Then the colonel suddenly reached up, slowly, with both hands and pressed his temples as if in pain.

The hands, the arms, of the colonel moved like a man whose muscles had just failed. Slowly, without strength. Forsyte pressed his temples, shook his head like a sleepwalker, and then his arms dropped and his eyes closed. He lay in the chair like a man asleep.

But it was like a drugged sleep, uneasy, almost painful and too deep. His arms hung down at his sides; his breathing became heavy, labored. Solo watched him, and then heard, again, the faint humming sound that seemed to come from the ceiling of the room.

He suddenly remembered the way Forsyte had been forced to take the deck chair—it had been the only chair vacant when the colonel entered. No one else in the hot room was reacting in the manner of the colonel.

Solo looked up at the ceiling. The humming sound continued.

Solo stood up and left the hot room.

He wrapped the towel around his waist and looked back once. Forsyte still lay there like a drugged man. The muscular man was staring at Forsyte, but the man had not moved.

Solo looked around and saw a door marked for a fire exit. He opened the door when he was unobserved. Stairs led upward.

FIVE

IN THE ALLEY Illya Kuryakin crouched in the shadowed afternoon behind a rank of garbage cans. At this hour of the afternoon no sun came into the alley, and the area was in dark shadow. The three men still talked near the rear door to the building.

Illya moved silently closer. The men did not notice.

"We've watched him all day, and I'm damned if he could have passed anything," the tall man said.

"Is Gregor still with him?" one of the other men said.

"Yes. In the health club. He contacted me."

"The Boss says it's certain that Forsyte passed the info on to Dachado. We've got to find out how."

"We'll find out," the tall man said.

"Why don't we just grab him and get it out of him?"

"Let the Boss do the thinking."

"Hell, we'd get what we wanted in five minutes with some of the stuff we've got."

"Sure," the tall man said, "but what if Forsyte doesn't know anything? What if he just passes the info to someone he doesn't know, or just leaves it at a drop? As soon as we grabbed Forsyte they'd know about it, and maybe we never catch up with who he gives the stuff to."

"I never thought of that," the other man said.

"That's why you're not Boss and never will be," the tall man said.

"The Boss takes his orders."

"Sure he does, and up top they know more than we do. We do our job and get paid. Right? We get paid pretty well."

"It beats working," the other man agreed.

"Do we just wait here?" the one who had not spoken said suddenly.

"For a signal from Gregor. Maybe Forsyte ducks out the back. Who knows?" the tall man said.

"Or the front. I better check with Ord out front to be sure he's watching," the man said.

Starting to walk as he talked, the man came directly toward Illya. Despite the shadows it was still daylight. There was no way for Illya to not be seen. He drew his U.N.C.L.E. Special, fired a sleep pellet at the man, and ran for the mouth of the alley.

The man he had shot took another step, opened his mouth, and pitched forward, unconscious. The other two saw Illya. But they had to draw their guns and he had almost reached the mouth of the alley when two shots whistled past him.

Two men suddenly appeared in the alley mouth. They had guns.

Illya skidded to a halt.

The two men came toward him. Behind him he heard the other two men. The blond Russian looked around quickly. There was an open window just to his right in another building. He ran and jumped for it. He was sure they would not shoot until they knew who he was.

His fingers closed on the window sill and he hauled himself up to the sill. He raised his knee to climb inside.

Something stung his neck.

The last he knew his fingers were slipping and then there was only falling through space.

SIX

WRAPPED IN THE towel, Napoleon Solo moved along a dark hallway on the floor above the health club.

The rooms up here were all dark, and nothing seemed to move. The hall stretched silent and dim Solo felt very naked and exposed in his towel in the

dark hall, but downstairs he would have been conspicuous in clothes. He moved on along the hall.

He heard voices and someone coming in the distance where the hallway ended. There was a closet near. He opened the door and slid inside, leaving the door ajar a crack.

The voices came closer, and turned into the narrow corridor outside the closet.

"I tell you there was a disturbance in the alley."

"And I don't like the look of that muscular fellow in the hot room. He's never been here before."

"We better finish with Forsyte fast."

The voices and footsteps almost reached the closet door, but turned sharply right before they came abreast. Solo saw the two men, both wearing the white uniforms of health club attendants. They went through a door in the opposite wall and failed to close it. Solo heard the humming sound, louder now and closer. He slipped out of the closet and glided up to the half open door.

He looked in and saw a macabre scene like the scenes he remembered from the horror movies of his childhood.

The room was totally bare except for two more men, four in all, and a grotesque-looking machine. The four men all wore health club white uniforms. The machine wore nothing but a sense of cold efficiency.

It was a large machine that looked like a computer on wheels. A square section, covered with dials and buttons and flashing lights, was mounted on legs. Tape reels turned on its face. Beneath it, where it stood in the center of the room, a long tubelike shape protruded down like a searchlight and entered a hole in the floor.

The humming noise came from the machine. The four men all worked around the machine, touching dials, observing gauges, making adjustments. They looked like the fanatic priests of some evil god. They were so intent on their work that they did not notice Solo standing in the open door.

Solo had little doubt that this machine was aimed down into the hot room and at Colonel Forsyte.

"Finish it off," one of the men snapped.

"Quiet," another man said.

This last man spoke softly, almost gently, and yet there was a hard commanding sound to his voice. When he spoke the others all looked at him. Solo had no doubt that he was the leader. In the flashing lights of the machine Napoleon Solo saw his face. It was a pleasant face: tanned, healthy, with a sharp nose and bright, intelligent dark eyes. His hands were long and slender as they worked the dials of the macabre instrument. His hair was grey and thick, like the shock of hair of some professor. He was a small, slender man.

"To withdraw the instrument abruptly could kill Forsyte," this leader said quietly. "It must be shut down slowly. Would you care to leave a body here? Or a mad man? I have no wish to be traced through Forsyte and a hasty mistake. We are almost ready for the full development."

"Sure, Chief," one of the other men said.

The other two nodded. The slender man continued to work his dials like a man caressing a woman he loves. He seemed to talk to himself, almost crooning, as he worked. "The key to the sweeper is that it leaves no trace and no memory of its use, remember that. Isn't that so, little beauty? You touch the mind and the mind whispers to you and no one knows. That is your talent, isn't it, little one? No one can ever know you have been at work."

The slender, grey-haired man laughed softly. It was a laugh with an edge of insanity. The kind of insanity a brilliant mind can have when something has

given it a small, sudden twist, and left all else normal.

"Professor—" one of the other men began to say.

The slender, leader snapped. "Very well! I understand the need for speed. I am nearly finished. Another few minutes. I have begun the withdrawal. If you are so worried, check with Drago below and hasten the departure of our patrons."

One of the men turned and started for the door. Solo leaped back just in time and slid again into the closet. The man came past the closet—and his footsteps stopped. Solo looked around the closet. There was a large laundry hamper filled with soiled towels and white uniforms. He climbed inside quickly and covered himself.

He heard the door to the closet open. He held a deep breath so that he would make no sound and the towels would not move to his breathing. He heard someone poking around in the closet. Then the man went away and the closet door closed.

There was a sharp click.

Solo raised his head from among the towels. The closet was pitch dark now. He climbed out of the towels and went to the door. It was locked and there was no lock inside. The man who had come in had sprung the lock and closed the door, and it operated only from outside. Solo listened at the door.

He heard low voices and movement. He could not break out while anyone was there. He would be a sitting duck—naked as a baby and without weapons. All he had was his ring. He bent close over the ring and touched a tiny button.

"Bubba, this is Sonny. Mayday. Come in Bubba. Mayday, Code Two, come in Bubba. Sonny calling Bubba."

Silence.

Solo stared at his ring in the dark. He tried again. "Bubba come in. Sonny to Bubba. Mayday."

Silence that seemed to hang in the dark air of the closet. Solo rubbed his chin. He could use the audible signal—but what if Illya were hiding? He tried once more.

There was no answer. Solo touched the ring again.

"Control Central, Sonny reporting. Come in Control Central."

It was the voice of Waverly himself that answered.

"Where are you, Mr. Solo? Your signal indicates you are very close to Headquarters."

"Close, but too far," Solo said dryly. "I'm about five blocks away, locked in a closet."

"Really, Mr. Solo, this is no time for childishness," Waverly's slow, clipped voice said.

Solo smiled. The calm, matter-of-fact voice of Waverly had saved many an agent from panic and death. The voice was only a cover. Waverly was serious and concerned about all his agents.

"Sorry, sir," Solo whispered. "But I can't raise Illya, and I am locked in a closet, and I think I have something."

"We will try to contact Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly's voice said. "What do you have?"

"A machine. It's in the health club," and Napoleon Solo described what he had seen. "It looks like this machine somehow gets the data from Forsyte, or anyone else."

There was a silence. Then Waverly's voice came again almost as calm as ever—but not quite.

"Mr. Solo, you must get closer to that machine. If possible get it, if not destroy it. We—we have heard vague rumors of such a machine for many years. It was reported during the Korean conflict as something being worked on by a mysterious ex-Nazi scientist. Until now, it was only an impossible rumor. If—"

Waverly left the sentence hanging. In the closet Solo nodded as if Waverly could see him. Perhaps Waverly could.

"It is vital, Mr. Solo, you understand? Such a machine in the wrong hands?"

"I understand, sir. But I can't get out of this closet until the place is deserted. I'd be caught in seconds. Meanwhile, Forsyte and the people here can walk away. If Illya is outside, he should watch."

There was another tense silence. Then—

"We cannot raise Mr. Kuryakin either. I am sending men to look for him and watch your building. They will await your signal before they enter the building."

Solo felt cold. Where was Illya?

"Illya was right behind me, sir. What does his brain sensor report as his location."

"It reports nothing, Mr. Solo. His sensor has faded out."

In the closet Solo did not move. All U.N.C.L.E. agents of first rank now carried tiny sensors implanted. The sensor located them when all other means failed. The sensors would not function from only three causes: over one hundred miles; some device that could block their signal—and death.

In the closet Napoleon Solo felt alone and suddenly frightened.

ACT II

HAWK IN A SPARROW SUIT

ILLYA KURYAKIN had a dream. He was a child again in his far-off home, riding wildly on a Mongol pony over the great vast spaces of the Steppes. The great forests, and the deserts, and the towering mountains of all of Siberia seemed to flash past under the flying hooves of his horse. He shouted to faceless companions, the abandoned comrades of his Russian youth. He shouted in happy Russian.

And woke up shouting the Russian words to cold, blank walls.

For a moment he lay still, not quite out of the dream, and feeling sad. Whenever he dreamed of his youth, his friends were always faceless, as if he carried a guilt for abandoning his homeland and his people.

Then he was out of the dream and coldly awake. He did not move at once, but looked around him without moving. He was in a small, dark room. Four walls without windows. Stone walls and a dirt floor and a wooden door studded with iron. A stone ceiling very high. The room was like a deep well and he was in the bottom.

Illya sat up. He could sit up. Neither his hands nor his feet were tied. But he had been stripped, literally, and dressed in some neutral grey trousers and a grey sweater. They had done a good job on him. All he had was the long, thin steel needle under the fake scar on his leg. Even his ring was gone.

He stood up and began to study the room. The first step was to see if he was being observed. He checked every inch of the walls and ceilings but could locate no hidden cameras, and he was sure that everything was real stone with no one-way mirror for observation. He also found no evidence of a microphone, but that was almost impossible to be sure about.

Next he studied the floor and walls for any possible secret doors. As far as he could tell the floor was solid earth, and the walls solid stone. The door was heavy oak, iron banded, and apparently locked by a bar on the outside. Illya saw no evidence of any other kind of lock.

He stood at the door and leaned his ear against it. He could hear nothing. There seemed to be no guard, and no sounds of anyone else. Not even distant sounds. Wherever he was, Illya was buried deep. He turned and once more surveyed the room in which he stood.

He assumed that by now he would have been missed, but with his radios gone, and buried in this room, they would have a hard time finding him. Unless he could get out somehow and give them some help. They would have traced his sensor, unless he had been taken too far. He had no way of knowing just what time it was, or how long he had been unconscious.

His bright, deep-set eyes continued to survey the room. He was looking for a flaw, any flaw. He thought of a conversation he had once had with Napoleon. He had insisted that there was no such thing as a prison cell from which a man could not escape without outside help, and without bringing any tools in with him. Solo had not been sure.

"What a man can build, Napoleon, a man can break out of," Illya had insisted.

"You mean there has to be a flaw?"

"There is always a flaw, my playboy buddy," Illya had said.

"If you can find it, my Russian jailbreaker," Solo had said.

If you can find it. Yes, that was the problem. And Illya recalled wryly that he had not said how long it might take. It had taken old Monte Cristo a devil of a long time. But Monte Cristo, too, had made it in the end.

All the while Illya had been thinking; his quick eyes had been searching the walls, the floor, the distant ceiling high above. It was sometimes best to let your eyes look while your brain thought of something else. The eyes, trained, could often see what the confused brain could not.

And he saw the drain.

It was set low in the floor far at the rear of the stone prison. Illya crossed to it and got down on his hands and knees. It was a small round drain in a low part of the floor. About four inches in diameter, and held in place by two screws. With the screws out it was a three-inch pipe. It seemed to lead straight down. Yet it had to connect to a main drain somewhere, or turn and run outside.

Illya considered the pipe. It was much too narrow for him to crawl down. He could dig, and probably find an eventual escape, but that would be a long job without tools.

He stood and again toured the room. This time he saw a faint glint. It was in another corner of the floor. He got down and looked closely. Then he began to dig in the dirt. He came up with a steel soup spoon. He looked at it. Probably left by some former prisoner. It reminded him that he was hungry, and that they who had captured him would probably come to feed him at some time.

Which made the prospect of digging out around the drain pipe just about impossible. It would take so long they would be sure to catch him. With the spoon in his hand he again went slowly around the room. He found nothing. He sat down in the center and felt discouraged. Maybe he had been wrong. Or maybe he simply didn't have enough time.

Then Mr. Kuryakin found himself staring at the door.

The heavy wooden door with its iron bands. His dark eyes blinked. He ran his hand through his shock of blond hair. He blinked, and looked hard at the door. There was something about it. He stood up quickly and walked to the door. With the spoon he pried at the wood in the center where four round iron studs protruded.

The wood was rotten!

With the spoon he could dig a small hole with little pressure. Around the four iron studs. The wood, just at those points, had rotted from years of moisture and contact with the rusted iron. It would be slow work, but he was sure he could dig around all four studs.

And he was sure that the studs were the anchors that held the lock-bar on the outside!

In which case two should be enough. If he could dig out just two of the iron studs. If—

His gaze fell on the bottom of the door. The wood had rotted at the bottom also. And the cross bracing of iron was held on this side by a heavy spike. He bent. The spike moved in his fingers. It was loose. It would dig through the door much faster than the spoon.

On his knees Kuryakin dug at the loose spike with his spoon. It was not easy. He dug, pried, used the spoon as a lever. He began to sweat. Every few minutes he stopped to listen. There was no sound outside the door. Not even a distant sound. He dug on.

Until with a pull that took all his strength and gashed his fingers, the spike came out. He stood up with the spike. It had a sharp point.

He began to dig the wood out from around the studs at the side of the door farthest from the door jamb.

He stopped every few minutes to listen.

TWO

SOLO LISTENED inside the dark closet. It had been at least fifteen minutes since he had heard a sound. Nothing seemed to move beyond the locked door. He turned and began to move every large object in the closet. He piled the clothes hamper, an old desk, and two metal filing cabinets in a line from the rear wall to the door.

Braced with his back against the line of furniture, he placed his feet against the door and pushed with all his strength, slowly building up pressure. The door creaked, but did not give. Solo relaxed, breathed deeply, and once more used his whole body like a jack against the door. It creaked again, gave with a faint tearing of wood.

The third time he braced, and forced his feet against the door, he felt it slip and almost open as the wood tore with a low rasping sound. He stepped to the door and listened. There was no sound. He turned and went to the hamper and found a white health club suit that fitted him. He dressed in it, and went back to the door.

He listened again. No sound. Not even the humming noise or the noises from the health club below.

He leaned his full weight against the door, braced his feet on the floor, and pressed steadily and slowly. The door sprung open with a last ripping sound. It swung away. Solo caught it with a quick motion before it banged against the wall, and stood in the dark corridor listening.

Nothing seemed to move.

The door to the room above the hot room was still open. He looked in cautiously. The strange machine was still there, but silent and motionless now. Before he went to examine the machine, Solo stepped carefully along the hall to the door he had come up through earlier. He listened at the door. He heard slow noises below, as if the health dub staff were going about the normal business of closing for the night.

He went back along the corridor to the far end, where a cross corridor intersected. He searched down both wings of the cross corridor and saw nothing. He went back along the dark hallway to the room of the machine.

In the bare room he looked around. There was nothing in the room but the strange machine with its black tube aimed down into the floor. The machine was still, and the large tape spool was gone.

Solo studied the machine for a time in the dark, but he could make nothing out of it. It seemed like a combination of tape recorder and computer, with a sealed section in the center with dials and buttons that he did not recognize.

He got down and examined the long black tube that went down into the floor. It resembled an advanced and complicated X-ray machine. It was

slightly warm to his touch, as if shut down only recently, and as if it generated heat, which probably was why it was being used in a hot room.

The ceiling of the hot room was exposed through the hole in the floor of the room. A perforated ceiling, and Napoleon Solo could just make out parts of the hot room below. There was no doubt that the long black tube was aimed exactly at the deck chair in which Forsyte had been sitting. Which meant that Forsyte had been the target, since it was now certain that he had been purposely maneuvered into that specific chair.

Solo stood up. Whatever the strange machine was, he was sure that it was how Forsyte transmitted the data—and probably not voluntarily. Solo raised his ring to call help. It was time U.N.C.L.E. moved it.

"Control—"

He stopped and froze. He had heard a noise. A soft, sliding noise. It seemed to come from a door to the right in the room. Solo stepped to the door and listened. The sound did not come again. He looked around for a weapon. There was nothing. The sound came again, like a man crawling slowly across the floor.

Solo opened the door quickly, alert and ready to use his karate-trained hands.

It was another dark room, but Solo saw what caused the weird noise. The wide, muscular man who had been following Forsyte was crawling weakly across the floor. He looked up and saw Solo. There was blood on his face. Solo stepped to him and bent.

He heard the step too late. Half turned, Napoleon Solo was hit solid on the head and fell on his face.

THREE

ILLYA KURYAKIN listened. There was still no sound of anyone outside the heavy wooden door.

Illya carefully removed the last iron stud. There was a sliding sound, metal sliding against metal, and then a heavy thud as the crossbar hit the floor outside. A solid thud, but not loud. The floor out side must be dirt, too.

Illya opened the heavy door and stepped out. The corridor was low and dark and the floor was dirt. There was no one in sight. The iron bar that had locked the door lay on the floor with the iron loop released by the studs still around it. Illya picked it up as a weapon, and started to the left where he saw a faint rectangle of light.

The rectangle was much closer than he had expected. The light was dimmer. Illya peered out of the open end of the corridor. He saw a large and high room, a cellar. He was in the cellar of some kind of large house. Old garden furniture was piled everywhere. The debris of many years of a large house. He guessed that the room he had been had perhaps been a wine room at one time, which would partly account for the drain.

The garden furniture, and the nature of the cellar, pointed to a country house somewhere. From the size of the cellar, Illya guessed that the house was some old mansion up in the Hudson Valley probably not too far from the city. Which also meant that this was probably the sub-basement.

He listened again, heard nothing, and moved out into the open cellar, gripping the iron bar. He crossed quickly with his cat-like silence toward a low stone archway. He went through the archway and saw, as he had expected, a flight of stone steps leading upward.

He went up the stairs swiftly and silently. There was a heavy wooden door at the top. It was open. Illya scowled. The security seemed very lax. He pushed open the door slowly, and then flattened back. A man in a black suit sat on a chair a few feet from the door.

The man was tilted back against the wall, his right side facing Illya, and a gun in his lap. The man was not asleep, but he was not alert. He had not heard Illya open the door.

Illya peered out and saw that where the man sat was in another corridor that had once been a cellar—the first basement. But it had been converted, and

now had darkly paneled walls. An ornate door was at the far end. Illya saw no other guard, and watched the man in the chair yawn and stretch.

Illya leaped out in the middle of the guard's stretch. The guard heard him, tried to break his stretch and go down for his gun. Illya's iron bar caught him on the side of the head and the man went over, chair and all. Illya took the gun and jumped over him and ran down the corridor to the ornate door.

This door, too, was not locked. Illya opened it cautiously. There was no guard and a wooden stair case leading up. Illya went up these stairs slowly and carefully. There was no door at the top, but the stairs made a sharp left and emerged into a large, vaulted baronial-style hallway. Or they opened into a smaller and lower passage that led from the baronial hall.

Now there were sounds and people.

Illya Kuryakin heard voices, and men walked back and forth across the great hall. Through high windows Illya saw the fading sun of evening. From the position of the sun it was clear that the house faced west. The men who paraded through the vaulted entry hall all carried guns.

Illya looked straight across from where he stood to the opposite wall of the smaller passage. There was a door that, if he knew the usual layout of mansions such as this, should lead into a back hall. Unseen, he moved silently across the narrow passage and went through the door. It was a back hall.

He went down the back hall to ward the far door, looking for the door that should lead into the kitchen. He held his submachine gun ready. He could not find the kitchen door, and he suddenly heard voices coming toward the back hall from in front of him. He turned to retrace his steps, and heard someone coming from the other end. He looked around quickly. In the rear hall he was trapped, and one gun would not win against a house full of enemies.

Quickly he tried the doors that led from the rear hall. The first two were locked. The third was open, and Illya jumped through just as the first men

appeared in the rear hall. He stood for a moment catching his breath—and then became aware that he was in a lighted room.

"Ah, Mr. Kuryakin. Come in, come in."

The voice was soft and mocking. It came from behind him in the lighted room. Illya tensed. His muscles bunched as he prepared to turn.

"I wouldn't try that, my dear Illya. If you turn slowly you will find that you are carefully covered from about six directions," the mocking voice said. "Not to mention the men in the rear hall, who will come in the instant you turn."

Illya turned slowly. He saw the black-uniformed guards all around him, their guns leveled. He was in a comfortable paneled room furnished with the best leather furniture. A lion's head bared its teeth above a massive fireplace. But that was not what Illya looked at. He looked at a tall, distinguished, grey-haired man in immaculate dinner clothes and black tie who stood in the center of the room with a drink in his hand and a smile on his well-groomed face.

"That's better," this man said in his mocking voice. "Now lay down your gun, my dear Illya, and we can have our talk."

Illya laid down his gun and stood facing the elegant man.

"Good. I must say you showed the usual U.N.C.L.E. initiative in getting here," the man said, and looked at his watch. "In good time, too. I told my people that a simple spoon left in the right place would be enough for Illya Kuryakin to escape, and I was right, eh? But not all U.N.C.L.E. men could have done it, you know? I have often wondered why you continue to take a back seat to Solo. I consider you far more dangerous."

"Thank you," Illya said wryly. "I'll be glad to tell Napoleon. You've been watching me? You left the spoon?"

The elegant man shrugged. "A small amusement. But not all a game, eh? I have always told my fellow Council members that keeping an U.N.C.L.E.

agent busy is far better than the most total security. Give them a project to occupy their busy minds and hands, and that way I always know what you are up to, eh? I mean, my dear Illya, if I had not provided you with the spoon and the old door, you might have come up with an escape plan that would have been better. You see?"

The elegant man laughed. His men, their guns ready, all grinned. Illya smiled himself.

"Very clever, Danton. I have al ways said that you are one of the most clever of THRUSH leaders."

Emil Danton, North American Leader of THRUSH, bowed his head and laughed again as his men moved in on Illya Kuryakin.

FOUR

SOLO CAME awake in an instant. He did not move. Only his eyes moved. As far as he could see he was on the floor of the room where he had been attacked. The room was dark, and nothing seemed to move anywhere.

He sat up. He was not tied. He listened but heard nothing. Then he heard a groan. It came from close by in the dark room. Solo looked to his right and saw the figure on the floor. He crawled to the man. It was the wide, muscular man who had followed Forsyte.

Solo looked down at the man, who moaned again but did not open his eyes. Solo saw the blood and the ugly wound on the man's head. He raised the man's eyelids. The eyes rolled. The wide man had obviously been hit harder, or more often, than Solo.

Solo stood up. His head hurt, but he brushed it off. He was thinking. He still had his ring. But before he contacted Control he wanted to know more. Why had they left him and the muscular man alive—and who were they? He got part of his answer at once.

He went out into the larger bare room where the machine had been. The machine was gone. He looked down through the hole in the floor. The hot room below was dark. Solo turned and went warily out into the hall. All was dark and silent. He walked along the hall to the door he had come up through, opened it softly, and looked down.

The health club below was pitch dark. There was no sound of any kind. Solo moved carefully down the stairs and came out in the dark health club. He went through the steam room and the hot room and the shower room. There was no one anywhere. Out in the pool the water stretched blue and smooth like glass. The pool was dark.

Solo turned and returned to the locker room. The room was dark and deserted, too, the lockers all standing open. He found his clothes in his locker and realized that who ever had attacked him had undoubtedly known that he was somewhere in the building by the simple fact that his clothes were in the locker.

His pistol was gone, but otherwise the lieutenant's uniform was untouched.

He found nothing in the locker room. He went into the club office and searched the desk and files. There was nothing at all but the records and other data that related to the health club. In fact, the entire club seemed to have suddenly stopped in its tracks, leaving every thing where it had fallen. Solo had a strong feeling that whoever had been operating the strange machine had cleared out and was not coming back.

Which would explain why they had left him and the muscular man alive. They felt safe enough, once they had gone, and they probably did not want dead bodies around to bring the police on their trail. They had simply hit the muscular type too hard. That gave Napoleon Solo a thought: if they had hit the muscular person as well as himself, then that meant that the muscular man was not one of them. Who was he, and why had he been following Forsyte?

Solo went back upstairs. The short, wide man had not moved. He still lay there in a kind of coma. Probably with a skull fracture or a bad concussion.

Solo bent down over him to examine his clothes. There were no labels in his clothes

His pockets were empty. Then Solo noticed his fingers.

The fingerprints had been removed surgically.

Solo stared at the fingers for a moment. Then he reached down and pushed up the man's sleeve, unbuttoned his shirt cuff and rolled it up. The number was there: T 778890.

THRUSH.

So THRUSH was in this—interested in Colonel Forsyte and the health club. Solo. narrowed his eyes. He had little doubt now as to what had happened to Illya. The small Russian was certainly in the hands of THRUSH. If Illya was still alive.

Solo looked down at the muscular man. The question was—was THRUSH part of the transmission of the secret data, or was THRUSH after the same thing U.N.C.L.E. was? Was THRUSH, too, interested in just how Forsyte and the others had transmitted vital secrets when they were all men formerly above reproach? From the actions of the muscular man he was sure that that was just what THRUSH was doing—looking for whatever was being used on Forsyte.

It fitted with the action in Anagua. Agent 44 had probably been killed not by the spies but by THRUSH. So THRUSH, too, had somehow learned what information Forsyte could transmit and had joined the search. Solo thought about the weird machine—and what it might do in the hands of THRUSH.

The thought made him shudder—and then he heard the footsteps. Someone, more than one man, was coming up the stairs from the health club. He did not think that it was any of the health club staff returning. It was probably THRUSH. He thought quickly. He was still dressed in the white uniform of an attendant of the health club. He bent down as if searching the unconscious THRUSH agent on the floor.

The footsteps came quickly along the corridor, entered the room where the machine had been, and stopped suddenly close behind him.

"Freeze, friend," a voice said.

Solo did a good imitation of a man surprised, and then scared. He started, gave a small jump, and then froze as directed. Hands came up behind him and touched him expertly for weapons. The hands went away.

"Up. Turn around."

Solo turned.

The tall man who had been driving the car stood with a gun pointed at Solo. Two other men were with him.

The tall man jerked his head curtly toward the unconscious muscular man.

"Take a look at Gregor," the tall man snapped.

One of the other men circled Napoleon Solo and bent over Gregor. The tall man stared straight at Solo.

"All right, friend, start talking. Why'd you hit Gregor?"

"He was snooping around," Solo said in his best tough-man voice. "So are you."

The man who was looking at Gregor looked up. "He's hit bad. Maybe a fracture."

"Did you do it?" the tall man said to Solo.

"He fell," Solo said.

"Where are the others?"

"What others?" Solo said.

"How do they get the info from Forsyte?"

"Who's Forsyte?" Solo said.

The man who had not spoken suddenly swore. "Let's finish the dirty—"

"Shut up!" the tall one said.

"But he—"

"But he's one of them," the tall one said. "This must be where Forsyte passes the data. This joker knows how. They've slipped out on us, but we've got this one, and The Boss'll want to talk to him."

The other two nodded.

"Bring Gregor. I'll handle this one," the tall man said. The tall man grinned a wolfish grin at Solo. "Our Boss'll talk with you, friend. And believe me, you'll talk back."

They marched Solo out. Two of them carried the moaning Gregor. The tall man prodded Solo with his pistol. Napoleon Solo let them take him.

FIVE

EMIL DANTON leaned down over Illya Kuryakin.

"You'll talk, my dear Illya. You know our methods. And don't rely on that sensor you have implanted to bring my old friend Waverly. We have blocked its signal."

"You've been busy," Illya said dryly.

"Too busy," Danton said. "Sometimes I think we all spend much too much time devising weapons and defenses, and then making counter-weapons and counter-devices. It's a weary circle. Perhaps we should make a pact—no

more tricky weapons on either side. Go back to plain muscle and guns. It would save a lot of overhead."

Illya smiled. He was in the same room of the mansion, the massive fireplace looming before him, and seated in a special chair. He was not bound; there was no need. The chair held him by the electronic force that sent a searing pain through him if he tried to move. The guards stood silent. Only Emil Danton spoke.

"Come, Illya. You know you will talk. Save me the trouble and mess of torture or drugs. I'm truly weary of all that fuss. I know that you will stand the torture, and you know I'll use it if necessary. But you also know the drugs will do the job, and you can't resist them."

"Try me, Danton," Illya said, "This time you may be surprised. I may not know what you want to know."

"You know a great deal I want to know," Danton purred. "Still, you may be right about the immediate problem. What do you know about Forsyte? The good colonel has a fine record."

"I know that. He has a fine record," Illya said.

"Not a spy."

"Not a spy," Illya agreed.

"Yet he has passed on secret data."

"He has?" Illya raised an eyebrow.

Danton sighed. "Really, Illya, don't fence with me. You were following him. You arranged a test; we know that. I'm sorry about your agent in Managua. Not all my colleagues share my belief in avoiding unnecessary violence."

"You're a gentleman, Danton," Illya mocked.

"I try to be. After all; just because we are spies, thieves, murderers, and all that, is no reason we have to be uncouth. So, let us admit that we all want to

know just why a man of Forsyte's caliber turned spy, and how he is transmitting his data."

"All right, I'll admit that," Illya agreed. "I'm rather glad to know that you don't know."

"I'm sure you are, but we will know. Now, I think you know more than we do. A bad situation. I want you to tell me what you know. Right?"

Illya shrugged. "I assure you I don't know anything."

"How does Forsyte pass the data, Illya?"

"I don't know."

"What does that health club have to do with it?"

"I don't know. Perhaps nothing."

"He went straight home from that club. We followed him. He had no other chance to pass data."

"Maybe he didn't sell any secrets today."

Danton slapped Illya. "Don't be too funny, my friend. He follows a routine like a robot! We know that. His routine today was the same as yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that!"

"He's a very dull boy," Illya said.

Danton spun on his immaculate heel. The elegant North American Leader of THRUSH nodded to his men.

"Take him," he said.

Two of the black-uniformed men stepped forward, grinning. They had a hypodermic syringe with a very long needle of the kind used to drip a solution into the veins. One of them held Illya's arm tight and stiff. The other prepared to use the needle. Danton had walked to a far wall and stood

with his back turned. The THRUSH leader did not like the sight of violence.

Illya braced, concentrating his mind to use all the previous programming against divulgence of information he could. He felt the waves of mental strength tightening on his trained brain.

A loud buzzing sound broke the silence and the tension of the room. Danton turned abruptly and stared at a speaker on his desk. He motioned sharply.

"Wait," the dapper THRUSH leader snapped.

He strode to the speaker and flipped a switch. He listened. The voice over the speaker was too low for Illya to hear. Danton switched off and turned with a smile to Illya.

"We may not need your help after all, my dear Illya. Too bad. I'm afraid that means we have no use for you. You see, my men have brought one of the gang getting the secrets from Forsyte!"

SIX

THE DOOR TO the room opened and four men came in. Illya Kuryakin watched them. Three were obviously THRUSH agents in civilian clothes—the same three who had been in the alley. Illya saw the tall man in particular.

The fourth man was being pushed into the room by the tall man. The fourth man had his head down as if groggy, and wore the white uniform of the health club, but Illya was sure that he recognized the figure. It was someone he knew.

Danton stepped forward. "So, we've got one of you, eh? Good work, men. We'll have this one talking in no time. Or would you rather just tell us what we want to know without any trouble?"

Danton stared at the white-suited man, who still stood with his he down. The tall man pushed him forward.

"They beat up Gregor," the tall man said.

"The devil with Gregor!" Danton snapped. "What I want is to know just how Forsyte transmits his information. There has to be some very special method, and we want it. Now, you, tell us where the others are, and—"

Danton stopped. He stood there with his mouth open and stared at the figure in the white health club suit. His bright eyes blinked. Then he stepped forward and grasped the hair of the man. He pulled the head up.

Solo grinned. "Hello, Danton."

Danton dropped Solo's hair and jumped back as if he had been bitten. For a long moment he stared at Solo, who smiled and looked around the room like a man on a sightseeing tour. Solo grinned at Illya. Danton rubbed his face, brushed his hand through his immaculate grey hair. Then he began to shout.

"You fools!"

Danton shouted at the tall man. "You stupid ape! One of the others, eh? You idiotic incompetents! Do you know who this is? Eh? Don't you know your enemies! What morons am I forced to work with? I send you to get a gang with some method of taking secrets from reliable people, and you bring me another U.N.C.L.E. agent!"

The tall man stammered. "But—but he was wearing one of the uniforms. He was standing over Gregor. He—"

"Idiot! This is Napoleon Solo! Don't you know the Chief of Section-Il of U.N.C.L.E. How did you get to be an agent of THRUSH? I send you for someone valuable, and you bring me Solo!"

The tall man protested. "How could I—I mean, we're new in New York, sir, and—"

"Quiet!" Danton roared. "Do you know what else you've done?"

The tall man gulped. "No, sir.

"Shut up!" Danton shouted. "How many of you were there in your group?"

"Four, sir. The alternate group brought that other man here, and we—"

"And how many of you are there here now?" Danton snarled.

"With Gregor, sir, a total of four. We all—"

"Then who is doing your work? Eh? Who is watching the health club?"

The tall man was white. "No one, sir. They—they got out of the building without our seeing them anyway. So when they didn't come out, we went in, and we found Gregor and this man, and we were sure he was one of them, so we brought him here—"

The tall man trailed off in his weak explanation. Danton stared at him.

"You mean that you have lost contact. We have lost contact. You bunglers have let them get away, and we—"

Danton's tirade went on. All the men in the room were watching him. The three captors of Solo were pale with fear. The guards had their guns down. Solo edged away toward a guard who was looking only at Danton.

Illya touched his nose.

Solo jumped for the guard.

Illya hurled himself out of the special chair. The shock of pain, like a hammer blow, knocked him to his knees, but he was free of the chair. He jumped up and chopped a guard once on the throat.

Solo had a machine-gun in his hand. He shot down two guards who reacted to the sudden break.

Illya Kuryakin had a gun and sprayed the room.

The THRUSH agents all hurled themselves undercover. The tall man went down, spitting blood. Danton screamed and dived for a heavy oak table.

"Door!" Solo cried.

The two agents careened through the door and out into the baronial entrance hallway. Three guards came running into the vast hall. Solo and Illya shot them down with two quick bursts. Moments later they were out the front door and running across a gravel drive way toward the thick bushes of the grounds.

"There! Get them!"

It was Danton's voice, his courage back now that he was out of range. He was in the doorway behind them. Black-uniformed THRUSH guards poured across the driveway and the grounds.

Solo and Illya crashed through the thick bushes, ran across the parklike grounds under the tall oaks in the night. There was a glint of water to the left.

"The river!" Solo hissed.

"If we can," Illya panted.

They ran, and behind them the THRUSH agents pounded in mad pursuit. The night was dark and the THRUSH men were getting in each other's way. Danton's voice could be heard roaring his orders.

Illya Kuryakin stopped. "Not the river yet. They'll block us. Let's cut down the odds."

"Take two of them?"

. "Right."

The two agents circled back and dropped into the cover of a small ravine. Soon the THRUSH search moved close to them. Two THRUSH men passed above the low ravine. Solo and Illya rose up behind them like wraiths in the night. Both men fell without a sound under the single chops of the U.N.C.L.E. agents.

Moments later Solo and Illya were moving in the line of search toward the river. Danton was at the other end of the line. The search fanned out until Danton ordered a halt.

"They've gone to cover. Turn back and don't miss anywhere, you understand!" Danton shouted.

His men all nodded. Danton's voice was no longer smooth and urbane. The penalty for failure was high in THRUSH.

The search turned back inland.

Illya and Solo slid silently into the river and began to swim south.

ACT III

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE LATELY?

THEY EMERGED dripping from the river, a mile and a half south of the massive old mansion on the Hudson shore. They moved warily. Illya Kuryakin motioned Napoleon Solo to silence and crept up from the bank to a paved road that ran near the shore.

"All clear?" Solo whispered.

"All clear at the moment," Illya said. "Danton isn't a fool, Napoleon. He'll have figured it out by now, and then he'll fan out along the river."

"At least we know that THRUSH doesn't know anything about how Forsyte passed the information," Solo said.

"Do we?"

"We do," Solo said, and explained the macabre machine that he had seen in the room above the hot room of the Health Club.

"A machine?" Illya said. "No wonder THRUSH is so interested. They must have an idea, and in their hands such a machine would be murderous."

Solo was about to answer when both men heard the sound. Cars approached along the river road. They had no headlights. Illya and Solo went across the road quickly and burrowed into the deep bushes.

Two dark jeeps went past slowly. They were filled with THRUSH men, and in each jeep a sub-leader scanned the river and the shore through infra-red glasses.

The jeeps passed and vanished. But Illya and Solo did not move. They waited where they were hidden in the bushes. Moments later another car came by, its motor almost soundless in the night. In this car a man scanned the inland side of the road through infra-red binoculars.

The third car passed on and disappeared into the night.

"Let's move," Solo said.

With Illya Kuryakin following, Napoleon Solo walked away from the road toward the lights of a town some distance inland from the river. They avoided the roads, and crossed dark fields in the night. When they were near the town, and were sure that they were clear of THRUSH, Solo bent over his ring.

"Control Central this is Sonny. Come in Control Central. Sonny and Bubba calling."

Waverly's voice came calm in the night. "You have located Mr. uh, Kuryakin, I see, Mr. Solo. Good. Where are you?"

"About thirty miles up the Hudson Valley from New York. We've run into THRUSH."

"THRUSH, eh?" Waverly's voice said quietly. "I can't say that I'm surprised. The affair in Anagua had their fine touch about it. I gather that you have eluded them?"

"We were both caught, but we escaped. Danton is running the operation," Solo said.

"Emil himself? They must place considerable value on the affair," Waverly's imperturbable voice said. "Which I do myself, as I told you, Mr. Solo."

"Do you want us to go back and tackle THRUSH again?"

"That can wait, Mr. Solo," Waverly's voice said, and for the first time there was an edge to the voice of the Section-I Chief. "It seems that you may be safe, but I'm afraid no one else is. In addition to Forsyte, another man visited that health club today, gentlemen. He went there early this morning. Unlike all the others, who appear to have noticed nothing amiss, this man reported to his superiors that he was strangely 'groggy,' as he put it, when he left the health club."

"They must have used the machine, maybe too long," Solo said. "I heard their boss say it could have bad effects."

"Very probably, Mr. Solo," Waverly said. "But that is not my concern just now. What concerns me is the nature of the man in question. You see, he had the full details of the United States' nuclear detection program for outer space in his head."

Solo whistled. "The whole detection system?"

"Precisely," Waverly's voice sail. "You understand that in the wrong hands this top secret system information could mean the control of space. I do not want this data to be passed on—to anyone, especially not to THRUSH. The job has been put into our hands."

Solo and Illya looked at each other. The outer space nuclear detection program was so secret its very existence was not known out side the

immediate military, the White House, and U.N.C.L.E. In the wrong hands —?

"We don't know where the machine or the men who use it have gone," Solo said. "THRUSH doesn't seem to know either."

"Mr. Solo," Waverly's dry voice said from the distant room of U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters, "never underestimate THRUSH or me. Or yourself, for that matter. You may recall that you reported the machine. Our men were outside the health club. Fortunately, one of our teams noticed some men carrying a bulky object out of the next building and followed them."

"They must have had a secret passage between the buildings," Solo said.

"Apparently," Waverly said. "Be that as it may, our team followed them to an electronics plant near Princeton, New Jersey. The plant is named Rand Electronics, Inc. A Mr. Edgar Rand is listed as president. We do not know if Rand is involved, or if his plant is simply being used. But I suggest you find out."

"Yes sir," Solo said.

"The team on watch there is Peters and Jenkins. I want you to contact them and assume command of the operation—at once."

"Yes sir."

"And Mr. Solo, get that machine."

"Yes sir."

The night became silent. Where they crouched on the edge of the village they could hear the sounds of revelry and whisky from a roadhouse in the center of the town. The people of the small town were at their pleasure, their momentary joys, while around them in the dark night a deadly game was being played by men they had never heard of, a game that could mean the end of their lives or their pleasures if it ended the wrong way. And one

way or the other they would probably never know that the game had even been played.

"Well?" Illya said.

"I guess we go to Princeton."

"Perhaps we better stop and pick up our equipment first, Napoleon."

"Peters and Jenkins can supply us," Solo said. "The Rand plant may be only a short stop. From what I heard, they sounded like they were ready for a big move."

"Then we better move," Illya said.

The two agents searched the night carefully. THRUSH would not give up easily. It was certain that the black-garbed soldiers were still scouring the countryside for them. Solo and Illya entered the small village silently, like shadows in the night that flitted in and out of the light from the windows of the houses. They moved within the desperately happy noises from the tavern.

Outside the tavern there was a row of cars. One, parked farther away from the door than most of the cars, still had its keys in the ignition. Illya climbed in behind the wheel. Solo sat beside him. They started the engine and drove off. Illya turned into a side road that wound through the hills of Palisades Interstate Park. They did not see THRUSH.

An hour later, as the moon rose high, they crossed the border into New Jersey and headed south and east.

TWO

THE PLANT OF Rand Electronics was a long, low, two-story building of yellow brick set in the rich park-like countryside of the Princeton area. Once mainly farmland, and then big estates, the rich area had been caught

up with by industry, and now many light, smokeless industries such as Rand Electronics were settling all across the landscape.

Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo parked their stolen car off the road a quarter of a mile from the plant. They walked cautiously closer. The low building of the plant was bright with lights behind its high cyclone fence and a long row of thick bushes that edged a fine green lawn. Shadows moved inside the main factory wing of the plant.

"Night shift," Solo said.

"It doesn't look much like they're carrying on clandestine production of secret machines," Illya said.

"That's probably what they want us to think."

"And it could be a trick. The health club people could have been throwing us off by coming here," Illya said.

"We better find out," Solo said.

"Peters and Jenkins should be able to tell us," Illya said.

They moved on with their eyes alert in the night for their fellow agents. They spotted the dark shape of the U.N.C.L.E. car back off the road just outside the drive up to the plant. At the gate of the plant there was an open gate in the fence and a lighted sentry house. All was quiet at the gate, and Solo and Illya approached the car of their fellow agents.

"All clear, Peters?" Solo said as they neared the dark car.

"All clear," a muffled voice said.

Illya, behind Solo, went for the THRUSH machine-gun he still carried. Napoleon Solo dove for the cover of dark bushes.

The "All clear" of the muffled voice was the wrong signal. All U.N.C.L.E. agents used a recognition signal in answer to the questions of "All clear?" The muffled voice had given the wrong signal.

The two agents reacted instantly—but too late. Before Illya Kuryakin could bring his gun up, two men sprang from the bushes beside him, their guns already aimed at him.

Solo, flat in the bushes, looked up at feet and faces that stood over him. The dapper agent got to his feet with his hands up. Illya already stood beside the car, disarmed and watched by the other two men. A fifth man got out of the car. There was no sign of Peters or Jenkins.

"Sit," one of the five men ordered.

They sat.

"Keep your hands in front of you and in sight."

They placed their hands in their laps in full sight.

"Report to the Boss," the leader of the men said to one of the other men. "Tell him we have two more U.N.C.L.E. agents. These two we got alive."

The man went off to report. Illya and Solo glanced at each other. Solo looked up at the leader above him.

"You killed Peters and Jenkins?" Solo said.

The man shrugged. "They resisted. You two were smarter."

Solo and Illya said nothing. They sat with their backs, against the U.N.C.L.E. car, and their hands in sight. The five captors ringed them but did nothing else. The five were clearly waiting.

What they were waiting for became clear an hour later.

Nothing had happened at the plant of Rand Electronics. No one went in or out as they all waited in the night. Then the sound of a helicopter filled the night some distance away. The copter seemed to come low, and then there was silence.

The five captors waited with expectant looks on their grim faces.

There was noise in the bushes, and three men suddenly seemed to loom up in the night. One man walked ahead of the other two. He came and stood over Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo.

"Well, gentlemen, that didn't take long."

Emil Danton smiled down at the two agents, his immaculate grey hair unruffled.

"You two simply don't seem to be able to keep away from me, now do you?" Danton went on.

"We enjoy good company," Illya said.

"But different circumstances," Solo added

Danton laughed. "Well put. I really can't take any credit for recapturing you, can I? Isn't it lucky that I had a team of my men watching all U.N.C.L.E. agents involved in this affair? They not only led us to Rand Electronics, but to you two. Some days everything just works out nicely."

"You must live right, Danton," Solo said.

"I must, at that," the elegant THRUSH leader said. "And much as I'd like to remain and talk with you gentlemen, business calls. I think it's time I had a look inside that plant."

Danton motioned abruptly to his men. They jumped at his command. One of them, the leader of the five who had captured Illya and Solo, nodded to the two prisoners.

"Shall we kill them, Boss?"

Danton rubbed his chin. "Kill them? Not immediately. No, they are safe here, and after we conclude this little episode, they'll make a fine bonus to hand to Council. We can kill them later."

"Yes, sir."

"Leave three men to guard them. I suggest that you bind them or handcuff them. They are clever fellows," Danton added.

Illya and Solo were roughly handcuffed with their hands behind them, and sat back against the car on the ground. Danton took his four men and conferred briefly. Then he turned to Illya and Solo. The THRUSH leader smiled.

"This should not take long, gentlemen. Then I'll be back, eh?"

"Don't hurry," Solo said. "We'll wait."

"Yes, you certainly will," Danton said.

The immaculately dressed member of THRUSH Council made a sharp gesture to his men, and the five of them moved off in the night, crossed the road, and began to walk toward the gate of Rand Electronics.

The night became silent.

Illya and Solo sat on the ground with their hands cuffed behind them. For a time the three guards watched them. Then, as time passed, the guards became bored. They whispered among themselves, and two of them went and sat down and lighted cigarettes. The third continued to watch the handcuffed agents.

Illya sat against the right front wheel of the U.N.C.L.E. car. Solo was against the front right door. After a time even the guard who was watching them began to pace, turning his back on them from time to time. During one of the periods when his back was turned, Solo touched Illya's foot with his foot.

Illya nodded. His handcuffed hands began to feel along the rim of the hubcap of the U.N.C.L.E. car. Solo, against the, door, worked his cuffed hands beneath the car just under the door. The guard turned back. Illya and Solo grinned at him. He scowled and looked away. It was bad form for a THRUSH guard to let U.N.C.L.E. agents smile at him.

The guard turned abruptly and walked away from them, looking at his watch. He continued toward where his two fellow guards were relaxing. Illya Kuryakin gave a quick tug and the hubcap came off behind him. There was a faint metallic sound. Both men froze and watched the guards. The guards did not seem to have heard.

Illya's deft fingers located the thin strip of foil attached to the wheel inside the hubcap. The handcuffs were just loose enough for him to wrap the foil around the chain in the center. Solo had found the tiny pistol under the car, where it was attached for just such an emergency.

The three guards were having a laughing argument about who was to watch them.

In a moment they would be back.

Illya turned his back toward Solo. Solo turned his back to Illya. The small blond Russian raised his arms away from his body behind him. Solo reached back until their hands touched. Solo's fingers found the thin thread on the foil around Illya's handcuffs and pulled.

One of the other guards was getting up, ready to come and watch the prisoners.

The sudden head of the thermite foil seared Illya's wrists. The Russian gritted his teeth. Two seconds later the thermite had melted the chain and his hands were free. He quickly picked up the pistol Napoleon Solo had taken from beneath the car, and both men resumed their positions against the car.

The guard approached. Suddenly his eyes narrowed. He looked at them. It was clear on his face that he detected something wrong, but he was not sure. His gun ready, he came to them.

"Turn around," the guard commanded.

Illya pretended to try to turn. Impatiently the guard reached down to turn Illya. The small Russian's hand shot up and grasped the man's neck. With a

faint gurgle, the guard collapsed.

Solo and Illya were up and running in an instant, straight at where the other two guards relaxed under a dark tree. The guards heard them. One of them got his gun up. Illya shot him between the eyes with a single shot. The third guard tried to stand. Solo hammered him with a single blow of his manacled hands. The man dropped without a sound.

The two agents quickly picked up all weapons. Illya went to the trunk of the car and took out a long length of rope. They bound the two surviving THRUSH men. The one Solo had hit was still unconscious. This done, Illya retrieved another thermite foil from the hub of the wheel. It was a matter of seconds to release Solo. They then took a small picklock from under the rear seat of the U.N.C.L.E. car and removed the cuffs.

Illya looked at his watch. "Over an hour, Napoleon. Danton's been in there too long."

"With no sound of a fight," Solo said.

"Something's wrong," Illya said.

"Well, let's find out."

"Not in these clothes," Illya said. "Strip our friends; their suits might just fit. Lucky they're in civilian clothes."

The two agents changed clothes with the two guards. The suits were good enough. Each took an other pistol from hiding places on the U.N.C.L.E. car —the machine-guns would have been too conspicuous.

"Let's go," Solo said. "We don't have time to hide."

The two agents began to walk across the road and up to the gate of the plant.

THREE

FIVE MINUTES later Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo walked in the front entrance to Rand Electronics. Just inside the double outer doors they stopped and blinked.

The entrance lobby of the electronics plant was bright and busy. Corridors led off three sides, and employees seemed to be walking along the corridors as if nothing at all had happened or could happen. Everything looked like business as usual—yet an hour earlier five armed THRUSH men had entered this plant.

Illya and Solo looked at each other with raised eyebrows.

Directly in front of them a pretty blonde sat behind a reception desk. As they entered she was joking with a young man in the white coat of a laboratory technician. She saw them, and quickly shooed the young man away and gave Illya and Solo a dazzling smile up to her.

"Yes, gentlemen. Can I help you?"

"Jones and Ivanov from the defense department," Solo said, using the same story he had used to get them past the gate.

"Mr. Jones and Mr. Ivanov, of course," the girl said as if she knew their famous names by heart. She was every inch the beautiful receptionist. "May I ask who you wish to see?"

"You work late," Illya said, as he looked around at the activity along all the corridors.

"Two shifts," the girl said brightly. "You gentlemen should know that, defense contracts and all."

"Very good," Solo said.

"We try to keep production going," the receptionist said. "Now who did you say you wanted to see?"

"Mr. Rand," Illya said.

"Do you have an appointment? It's rather late for Mr. Rand."

"No, we have no appointment," Illya said.

"You might say this is a surprise visit," Solo said.

The blonde became frosty. "I see. Well, I'm sure that Mr. Rand has nothing to hide about our work for you. I'll see if he's in his office.

The blonde manipulated some keys on an intercom system and whispered low into a speaker, her eyes still on them and hostile. Both agents smiled at her, and Illya pretended to look around with a critical expression. When the girl looked away to listen more carefully to her intercom, Illya touched Solo.

"Security isn't very tight, Napoleon."

"No. It looks like anyone can just walk in," Solo agreed.

"Could it be a wild goose chase?"

"Maybe. But where is Danton?" Before Illya Kuryakin could answer this, the blonde receptionist turned to them again, all smiles now.

"Mr. Rand will see you. Straight down the center corridor, the last door on the left. You'll see Mr. Rand's name on the door."

They thanked her and began to walk. Their quick eyes noted the activity all around them. It seemed legitimate and normal. No one looked at them unduly and no one ignored them pointedly. They were observed and ignored in the exact combination and degree they would have expected for any visitors at a busy electronics plant.

"Could we be wrong?" Solo said.

"I expect we'll find out enough, Napoleon," Illya "There's the office. Keep you gun ready."

"I haven't taken my hand off it," Solo said.

Illya Kuryakin opened the door of the office marked: *Kevin Rand, President*. The two agents stepped in. Solo checked the corridor behind them. There were two young men in it who seemed to have no interest in them.

Illya surveyed the office.

It was a large office, as befitted the president of a company. There were four tall windows, shaded now at night. A large polished wood desk stood in front of the windows. There was a comfortable modern-Danish teak-and-upholstery couch, three matching chairs, and a coffee table. The tall swivel chair behind the desk was empty.

"He acts like a company president anyway," Solo said, indicating the empty chair. "Keep them waiting."

Illya said nothing. He was looking at the paneled walls. There was a door in each wall. Illya considered the doors.

"The one on the left probably leads to the next office," the small Russian IJ.N.C.L.E. agent said. "But where does that door on the right go? This is supposed to be the last office. The hall ends just outside."

Napoleon Solo looked at the door. "Maybe it goes into the plant."

"Suppose we take a look, Napoleon?" Illya said.

The small agent turned to walk toward the door on the right. Before he could take two steps the left hand door opened and a man stepped through. He smiled.

"So sorry, gentlemen. My apologies for keeping you waiting. I wanted to have some figures at hand," the man said, and waved a sheaf of papers.

Solo stared. He touched Illya as the two of them turned to face the man. It was the man who had been working the machine in the room above the hot room of the health club. The tanned, slender, grey-haired man his helpers had called Professor and Chief.

"You're staring at me, young man," the slender man said to Solo.

Illya positioned himself to cover the doors and drew his gun. Solo covered the grey-haired man with his pistol. The man looked at them both with an incredulous expression on his face.

"I gather you think you know me," the man said evenly, "and that you don't like me very much."

"Who are you?" Solo said.

"Who? Why, I assumed you had come to see me. I mean, my name is on the door."

"You are Kevin Rand?" Illya said.

"I certainly am, young man. What do you plan to do with those ridiculous pistols?"

The slender, grey-haired man stood firm and imperious in the office, but with a faint line of amusement around his mouth. Illya glanced at Solo. Solo stared hard at the slender Kevin Rand.

"And you don't know me?" Solo said.

"From your appearance perhaps I should, but I really don't," Rand said.

"You didn't see me in the health club?"

"What health club, Mr.—What are your names? I gather that you are not two gentlemen from the defense department named Jones and Ivanov."

"Do you have a twin, Mr. Rand?" Illya said.

"Not that I know of," Rand napped. "Exactly what is this all about?"

Solo stepped closer. "You claim that you were never in a New York health club. That you didn't get some top-secret data from a Colonel Forsyte by using a machine on him? That you didn't knock me out in the health club?"

Rand stared. "A machine that—what? Is this some kind of joke? Do I look like a man who could knock you out? Really, gentlemen, are you sure you feel quite all right?"

Solo spoke carefully as he watched Rand. Illya still covered all the doors.

"I saw you, Rand. I saw the machine and you operating it. I heard you talk about Forsyte."

Rand blinked, and then he nodded. "Did you now? Well, that puts a different look on it all, doesn't it?"

"I'd say it does," Solo said. "Now—"

Rand smiled. "Yes, well I had to be sure what you did know, didn't I? Get them!!"

Solo and Illya both whirled to the windows behind them. There was nothing there. Instantly they turned back.

Rand was gone.

"We fell for the oldest—" Illya began.

There was a sudden hissing sound.

Clouds of vapor, gas, poured into the office from vents in the ceiling.

"The windows!" Solo shouted.

They ran for the windows and tore down shades.

There were no windows. Where the windows should have been, where the shades covered, was nothing but blank wall with window sills nailed on!

"A trap," Solo cried.

"And we—" Illya began. Neither of them spoke again as they suddenly collapsed. The only sound in the room was the hiss of the gas.

FOUR

THEY REVIVED side by side in a large bare room with bright hanging lights. Faces stared down at them. In the center of the ring of faces they saw the smiling face of the slender, grey-haired man— Rand.

"So, gentlemen, you're awake. I was afraid for a moment that our little sleeping potion had been too much. That would have been too bad."

They blinked and looked around. They were seated on a couch along the wall of the large bare room. They were not tied, but men in white smocks held guns and stood all around. The room itself looked like a warehouse. Boxes of electronic parts were stacked everywhere.

"Yes," Rand said, "you are in our warehouse. It is quite safe and remote. You are my guests. The men with guns are only a precaution in case you preferred not to be my guests. Now, perhaps we can get down to business. Who are you, and who do you represent?"

"Represent?" Illya Kuryakin said. The small Russian moved his arms and legs to be sure that he was all right and not held by some device such as THRUSH'S special chair.

"Of course," Rand said. "And never mind telling me, that is a childish tactic on my part. You are Mr. Illya Kuryakin and Mr. Napoleon Solo of an organization called, I believe, U.N.C.L.E. And you are interested in my little brain child here, eh?"

They looked toward where Rand pointed. The macabre machine stood there in the shadows of the vast room. A row of tables and desks stood in front of it. Which was why the two agents had not noticed it at once. Rand watched their faces.

"I see you are interested," the slender man said.

"We're interested," Solo said. "Are you interested in destroying the machine?"

"Destroy?" Rand cried. "My brain child? Really, Mr. Solo, that is a poor joke. You have seen it work, you said? Surely you would not want to destroy such a marvel of the electronic art? Do you have any idea what it can really do, gentlemen?"

The eyes of the grey-haired man seemed to blaze for a moment at the thought of the marvels of his machine. "Beautiful! Sheer magic to think about. Imagine, gentlemen, to read the mind at any time in any place. Ah, who would dare destroy such a wonder?!"

"If it can do what you say," Illya said quietly.

Rand bridled. "If? You say if? Mr. Solo has seen what the Mind-Sweeper can do! That's what we call it, by the way. A rather clever name, I think. Our little mental vacuum cleaner, you might say. The Mind-Sweeper! It will revolutionize the world! Do you hear? And it is mine!"

"I took you for more of a businessman," Solo said.

Rand cocked an e "You did, eh? Very shrewd. Yes, I am a businessman. But I am also an electronics expert. I quite admit that the Sweeper is not precisely my development, but it is my creation. And you wonder if it can do what I say it can do?"

Rand looked at Napoleon Solo. "Mr. Solo has seen. You know that Forsyte came to the health club, and you know that he left his secrets there. A man above reproach. A man no pressure could have forced to reveal a word of what he knew—stripped of all his secrets within minutes!"

The grey-haired electronics man smiled at them. "I think you know much more, also. You know of my tests with the machine in London and in Ottawa. Successful tests. Naturally, we have moved the machine, to be certain we would not be caught while we were perfecting it. But you know of its successes in London, Ottawa, and now New York. We have now finished testing, and will soon market our little Sweeper, eh?"

Illya blinked. "You plan to sell the machine?"

"Why not? As you have said, I am a businessman. Think of the potential! Not a single nation could afford to be without a Mind-Sweeper. Not only does it sweep the secrets from the brain of any one, but it does so without them knowing it at all. Provided it is properly operated. Imagine—it takes the most secret data, and the subject never knows the machine has been working on his brain."

"Not always," Solo said.

"What?"

Solo grinned. "You used it on a man this morning, and he knew it."

Rand waved an angry hand. "A mistake. The idiots I left with to work it on the outer-space defense data made a small error. The man could have known no more than that he was a trifle dizzier than normal."

"It was enough," Illya said. "It will probably finish you."

Rand laughed. "I doubt it, Mr. Kuryakin. It is, however, one of the reasons we decided to end our tests and move now. No, I doubt if we will be found now."

"If it can make one mistake, it can make more," Solo said.

There was a silence in the vast room. Illya and Solo looked at Rand, but they were also studying the warehouse for possible escape. In addition to the armed men around them, there seemed to be another group in a far distant corner. Doors opened off the warehouse at the loading end, and other doors were in the inner wall that joined the production building. All the doors were closed and locked as far as they could see

Rand had stopped smiling. "No, there will be no more mistakes. You see, gentlemen, this is our prototype model. It is the only machine at the moment. I admit that it is not a simple machine; it took years to build and perfect. It has flaws. But the man who really invented the machine, our Dr.

Heimat, is even now about to complete his work on the production models. I assure you, gentlemen, that the production models will have no flaws, and will be much simpler to produce. I may not be the research genius Dr. Heimat is, but I am a production genius. That, after all, is the true genius of America, isn't it?"

Rand smiled and touched the grotesque machine lovingly. "Production, and perfecting what is only a raw idea," he said as if to himself. "That is the true American genius. Soon my Mind-Sweeper will be produced in mass production. Now it can absorb only what a man has held in his mind for a week, but soon it will absorb a month, six months, a year, and finally all that a man has learned since his birth! The power! The power!"

Rand's voice rose and echoed through the vast warehouse. All the men in the room looked toward Rand. His booming, half-insane voice carried like a wave through the room and reverberated back from all the walls. In the silence that followed no one moved. At last Rand blinked, sighed.

"So, I get carried away. It is the beauty of the universe, gentlemen, a perfect piece of electronic machinery. But let us talk more, eh? You asked if I am going to sell the Mind-Sweeper. That will depend on the offer, the problems, and the price. At the moment I'm also considering a lease-deal, you know. Lease it to all the countries, but keep the primary secrets to ourselves—with a proper destruct in case anyone attempted to take it apart. Not that anyone could— Heimat's basic secret is a theory no one else knows, not even me."

Rand smiled at them. "Of course, I'm also considering the idea of going into the spy business ourselves. In the long run that might be the best. What do you gentlemen think?"

They said nothing.

Rand continued to smile. "Perhaps you would care to make an offer on behalf of U.N.C.L.E. A large enough offer might induce me to sell it, and Dr. Heimat, to you. After all, I am a business man, and a businessman is in business to sell."

Rand watched them both like a small, bright-eyed bird. They still said nothing. They were both thinking of how they could stop this man, who was obviously partly insane. Rand touched his machine again. Only then did they notice that the machine was operating! Rand read a piece of printed tape from the computer section of the weird instrument.

"No, gentleman, I am not insane, not even partly," Rand said, and looked straight at them. "You see? The machine does work. I have just read your thoughts. Now will you make an offer? And make it good. I already have one very good offer, don't I, Mr. Danton?"

With these last words, Rand raised his voice.

Across the room, in the middle of the other group of armed men, Emil Danton stood up and stared straight at Illya and Solo.

FIVE

RAND LAUGHED aloud. "Mr. Danton came before you, my young friends, and on a similar errand. I'm afraid he was no smarter than you two. You see, it was simple to know what you had on your minds—my little Mind-Sweeper has a coaxial link to the lobby. You were all under mind reading the instant you entered! Another example of what my beauty can do. Once I knew what you had in mind, it was child's play to capture you."

Rand made an abrupt nod of his head. The armed men across the room brought Emil Danton to stand beside Illya and Solo. The elegant THRUSH leader had lost little of his self-assurance, and showed not the slightest mark of violence on his immaculate clothes. Danton shrugged slightly as he looked at the two agents.

"I see you fell into the same trap, my friends," Danton said. "I must say you show remarkable abilities to escape, but not very good ability to remain uncaught again. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, eh?"

"Hello, Danton," Solo said. "You seem to be pretty much in the same fire."

"Me, Napoleon? Hardly. I'm just another good businessman out to make a deal with Mr. Rand. That is a truly fine machine he has," Danton said. "All I have to do is convince Mr. Rand of the advantages of selling to me, or teaming with us."

"Rand is insane," Illya said dryly, "but I doubt if he is insane enough to trust THRUSH."

Danton laughed aloud. The elegant THRUSH council member was completely relaxed, or giving a good imitation. With Danton it was hard to be sure. Now the immaculate THRUSH leader took out a cigar case, selected a cigar, snipped the end with silver cigar- scissors, lighted the cigar, and began to puff contentedly. Rand watched him.

"Mr. Danton has made a substantial offer on the part of his, er, company," Rand said. "I have heard of his organization, and I have no illusions, but the offer is very attractive. Unless you gentlemen can think of a better offer—"

"No offer made by THRUSH is worth anything," Solo said sharply. "Once they have your machine they will have no use for you, and I doubt if you will get much use out of their money."

Danton shrugged. "Why, Napoleon, you hurt me."

Illya looked at Rand. "You must know that you can't trust THRUSH. I doubt if they have any intention of buying your machine, at any price. Danton is playing for time."

"And what are you doing, Kuryakin?" Danton snapped.

Rand held up his hands. "Gentlemen, gentlemen. We'll conduct this like businessmen. There is no need for these personal attacks. What I have is a simple business matter. I have a machine. I may wish to sell it. You are all interested in it. I'm not even sure that I care what you do with it after you buy it. If U.N.C.L.E. makes a really good offer, I will consider it, even if you mean to destroy the machine."

Danton went pale. "Destroy? Such a machine? No, Rand, that would be a crime! U.N.C.L.E. won't buy your machine! They are fools! Narrow-minded policemen! They would take the machine and then arrest you and lock you up as insane. Your Dr. Heimat, too. Don't listen to them, no matter what they say!"

Illya and Solo glanced at each other. Their eyes showed the same thought. It was Solo who put it into words.

"I think we might consider buying the machine. If we had absolute proof that it was the only model, and you sold Dr. Heimat with it," Solo said. He looked at Danton. "Under the circum stances I think U.N.C.L.E. might possibly top any bid THRUSH could make."

Rand nodded. "Good, that is the way I like to do business. What figure did you have in mind? Perhaps we can have a bidding session right now."

"Fine," Solo said. "Of course, I'll have to contact my headquarters to get the authorization. A mere formality, you understand. I imagine Danton will have to do the same."

Rand turned to Danton. "Will you?"

"Of course not," Danton snapped. "And can't you see what they're doing?"

"How will you contact your office?" Rand said.

"By radio," Solo said.

"I see," Rand said, and suddenly smiled again. "That is all I had to know, gentlemen. It seems that Mr. Danton is right. You have the minds of policemen. Too bad. An offer from U.N.C.L.E. would have been most interesting. But it is clear that all you want to do is contact your people and bring them here. Alas, I really thought that you were more clever."

"We would buy the machine," Illya said.

"Perhaps," Rand said, "but I cannot risk it, can I? No, I think U.N.C.L.E. is not a good organization to deal with. You are do-gooders, not businessmen.

You wish to save the world, not to make money. I do not like people who think of others rather than their own interests."

Rand turned to Danton, "Now I think the THRUSH offer is legitimate and interesting. Of course, I have other offers already, and there are other factors. But I think we can talk, Mr. Danton."

"We can talk," Danton said. "What about them?"

The elegant THRUSH leader indicated Illya and Solo.

Rand shrugged. "We will probably have to kill them. But for now I think we will simply hold them. Who knows, Mr. Danton? I might just throw them into a deal and hand them to you as a sort of bonus."

"That would be most useful," Danton said.

Rand laughed. "Take them out and lock them up downstairs."

The armed men prodded Illya and Solo to their feet. Moments later they were marched out of the warehouse through an interior door and behind them they heard Danton laughing with Rand.

The machine itself stood silent in the vast warehouse.

ACT IV

WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW CAN KILL YOU

FOR THE FOURTH time in twenty-four hours or less, Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo were marched away under guard. The four white-smocked armed men herded them along a narrow and dark corridor that slanted down beneath the electronics factory.

After a few minutes the corridor flattened out and rows of heavy doors began to appear along the walls. Some of the doors were open, and the two agents saw men busy in laboratories. Soon they passed a series of doors that

all opened into one room—a small factory inside the room, where men worked feverishly assembling parts into what looked like other models of the deadly Mind- Sweeper.

"A secret factory under the regular plant," Solo said.

"It had to be something like that, Napoleon," Illya said.

One of the armed men hissed, "Shut up! No talking, you two!"

They marched on. The four guards walked behind, two abreast in the narrow corridor. They reached a darker section where all the doors were closed. Ramps led up alongside passages to what were obviously loading areas. They were clearly now in a storage area.

"Do you think we have one chance?" Illya said. "Or five?"

"Two-out-of-six," Solo said.

"I said shut up!" the white smocked guard cried.

But Illya and Solo had given their signals. The guards, uneasy at the calm talk of their prisoners, moved closer. Illya and Solo waited.

"Stop," the chief of the guards said.

They stopped.

"Open the door," the head guard said to two of his men.

Two of the guards stepped to the massive steel door and opened it. The two went into the room and turned with their guns ready.

"Inside," the head guard said to Illya and Solo.

Illya stepped in first. Solo followed behind. Suddenly Illya gave a hoarse cry.

"Why wait! We'll never get out! I can't stand it!"

With a quick motion of his hand the small Russian seemed to pick a button off his suit and thrust it into his mouth, biting down hard.

Illya screamed, choked, and pitched forward to the floor, exactly in the doorway.

"Poison!" a guard shouted.

"Stand back!" the head guard snapped to Solo.

Solo backed out into the corridor. Two of the guards bent over Illya. The other two guards stared at the fallen figure of the Russian. They all talked at once.

"He's dead!"

"One of his buttons! Who searched him?"

"Rand'll be mad as hell."

"Open his collar!"

"Get a doc—"

The last speaker never finished. One of the guards bending over Illya laid down his pistol. Solo was now behind all four, for a split second forgotten.

With a motion so fast no one saw it, Illya Kuryakin raised up. In the same motion he stabbed the guard with a long, thin steel needle—the needle from beneath the fake scar on his leg.

The man, stabbed to the heart, dropped with a low scream. Illya grabbed the gun of the second guard.

Solo jumped on to the backs of the other two. One of them went down. The other turned to shoot Napoleon Solo. Illya clubbed this one with the butt of the gun he had picked up.

An instant later the two agents stood with guns leveled on the other two guards. Both guards raised their hands in fear as they looked down at their fallen comrades.

"Not a sound!" Illya hissed.

The two terrified guards nodded. Quickly the two agents stripped clothes and belts from all four men and bound and gagged them tightly. Then they put them inside the door and locked it with keys they had found on the leader's belt.

"They'll keep," Solo said.

They listened in the dark corridor. But any sounds that might have been heard had been covered by the noise of machinery in the underground factory. No one had heard anything.

"All right. Now let's see what Rand and Danton are talking about," Solo said. "Put on a white smock. It might help."

"And this time let's try to stay free," Illya said.

"I'm not worried about us," Solo said, "I'm worried about that machine. In THRUSH'S hands?"

"It won't be," Illya said.

Solo nodded and led the silent way back along the underground passages. They reached the area of the large factory room and peered in through the open doors. The men at work were all busy with their tasks. One or two looked up to see the white-smocked men pass by, and returned to their work unconcerned. Laboratory workers were always passing.

They moved faster through the section where the doors stood open into laboratories. Once a man called to them, but they mumbled the name of Rand and passed on. The man, probably some supervisor, did not come after them.

At last they reached the ramp upward. They held their heads down and went up toward the warehouse level. Twice men passed them, but did not stop. They reached the door through which they had been taken, and Illya listened with his ear against the door.

"What do you hear?" Solo said.

"Rand and Danton, quite a way off. I don't hear anything else," Illya said.

"We could walk right into a hornet's nest," Solo said. "This time we've got to get that machine first."

"More than that, Napoleon. We can't just destroy the machine; we've got to find out who has the outer-space defense system data, too."

"That means we've got to get Rand alive," Solo agreed.

Illya suddenly looked along the corridor.

"Someone's coming, Napoleon!"

The two agents looked around for cover. There was no cover. Not even a door or a closet. At the far end of the corridor, in the opposite direction from the ramp that led down to the hidden under ground factory, two men suddenly appeared. They were both wearing the same white laboratory smocks—and each carried a tray.

"Quick, Illya!" Solo whispered, and began to walk openly straight toward the two men with the trays.

Illya followed Solo. They walked boldly along straight toward the approaching men. As they got closer they saw that there were sandwiches on one tray and a bottle of whisky, water, soda and glasses on the other tray. When they were only a few feet in front of the two men, one of the men suddenly spoke.

"You got Rand's pickle? He got to have a pickle."

"I got it."

The other one nodded, and they brushed past Illya and Solo without looking at them. Solo nodded to Illya; the two men were bringing food and drink to Rand and Danton inside the large ware house room.

As they passed, Illya and Solo wheeled, struck each man on the back of the neck with single karate chops and caught the trays before they could fall, all in a single deft motion.

They placed the trays down and dragged the two men along the silent corridor until at last they found a closet. They bound and gagged these two also, in their own clothes, and ran back to the trays. Trays in hand, they approached the door to the warehouse room.

They tried the door. It was open. They went in, carrying their trays.

TWO

AT A DESK in front of the Mind-Sweeper machine, Kevin Rand and Emil Danton sat and talked. Only three armed men were still in the room with them. The warehouse was very quiet, and the banks of lights had been turned off until the only light was where Danton and Rand were conferring.

"I've told you my offer," Danton said. "Ten million dollars, in American dollars and all cash, for the machine, the factory and Heimat. You can throw in Solo and Kuryakin, too. You don't need them."

Rand smoked a cigar and considered. The slender grey-haired business man's eyes were bright and wary as he watched Danton. He waved his cigar, smoke eddying around his head.

"It is attractive. But far too little. Consider how much I could get by leasing the equipment once I have enough units, which will be soon. Why, I'd get ten million a year per machine."

Danton shook his head. "Nowhere near. After all, the machine is only a help, a convenience. I admit it could be a big help, but there are other ways of getting the data."

"Not so safely—and not without anyone ever knowing," Rand said. "That is my major selling point, Danton: the machine takes the information without essentially harming the subject, and without him being aware of a thing. You know yourself that one of the major problems of espionage is that information ceases to be of great value the instant someone knows you have stolen it."

"Granted, of course," Danton said, and frowned. "All right, I think we'll go fifty million for the whole shooting match. Cash."

"Hardly a scratch, Mr. Danton. What do you say to, say, five billion? American dollars, cash."

"Ridiculous!"

Rand shrugged. "I'm sure I could net that in a few years by a lease arrangement."

Danton bit his lip and glanced at the silent machine that stood like some malignant god in the room. "Think of the overhead, Rand. You might gross a billion over a number of years, but you won't come near netting it. You'd have to have a large, very strong, organization. You'd be a marked group. U.N.C.L.E., Interpol, half the police of the world would be after you. You'd need not only an enormous sales and contact staff, but heavy security as well. Then think of the risk? They'd be out to smash you from the start. Now we already have the organization, and the manpower, and we know how to handle the risks."

"I don't know," Rand said with a smile. "Ten million a year per machine will pay for a lot of protection."

"And cost most of the ten million per machine. Besides, you don't have the know-how to be sure everyone will pay. THRUSH has the know-how. They fear us, and fear is all that keeps governments in line, believe me. All right, one billion cold cash—tomorrow."

Rand made a tent of his fingers, contemplated. "One billion, eh? That's quite a jump. I wonder how high you fellows at THRUSH will really go?"

"One billion. That's it," Danton snapped.

Before Rand could answer through his smile, the two men stopped talking as two waiters in white smocks entered. The three guards still in the room stepped to the waiters and took the trays. Rand and Danton did not even glance at the waiters. They were too intent on watching each other in their strange and deadly game with the malignant machine hovering over the whole vast and shadowed warehouse room.

The two guards carried the trays to the desk. Rand glanced at the trays.

"Ah, here is our food and drink. Sandwich?"

"I'm not hungry," Danton snapped. "What about it, Rand? One billion. A fair offer."

"A drink, then?" Rand said.

"Scotch, no ice," Danton said. "I want an answer."

Rand busied himself making the two drinks. The guards went away at a small wave of his hand. The two waiters seemed to have left. Rand handed a drink to Danton, leaned back and began to munch on a sandwich.

"I'm sure you want an answer," Rand said. "But there is much I have to consider. I have other offers, you know."

"None to match ours. I know that, too."

"Perhaps, but there is still the idea of going into the spy business ourselves," Rand said. "You know, the interest you and U.N.C.L.E. and Interpol have shown is most illuminating. I am beginning to think that the greatest rewards of money and power lie in using the machine ourselves."

"We'd break you!" Danton said angrily.

"Would you now?" Rand said. "I suppose you would."

"Don't even think about it, believe me," Danton. said. "Now I've made a firm offer. One billion for it all. Take it or leave it."

Suddenly Rand began to laugh. The slender, grey-haired man shook with laughter, and tears streamed down his cheeks. He reached up and mopped at his eyes. He looked straight at Danton. The THRUSH chief watched Rand with a confused expression on his face.

"No deal," Rand laughed. "You don't really think I would trust THRUSH, do you? My dear Danton, you are no better than U.N.C.L.E. You are also playing for time. You have no intention of making a deal. Once I agreed, you would bring your army and take my Mind-Sweeper. I am not a fool!"

Danton protested. "I assure you—"

"Stop it, Danton! I know THRUSH. You would never honor such a deal. But I wanted to see how high you would suggest. It gives me a good estimate of the real power of my little beauty. No, I will not deal with you. I will operate myself. I have the first really big piece of data to sell already, the outer-space defense system of the United States. I believe I know where I can sell that for ten million alone."

"Why, you stupid—" Danton exploded.

Rand waved a peremptory hand toward the three guards. They came running, guns at ready.

"Take Mr. Danton away," Rand snapped.

Danton paled. "You'll regret this, Rand!"

Rand looked at him coldly. "Not as much as you will. Take him to a cell with his friends. We will shoot them later! Perhaps THRUSH will pay for him."

Protesting, Danton was led toward the door. The guards handled him roughly. Two of them took him out. The third guard remained in the room.

Rand sat at his desk, lost in thought. His eyes wandered toward the Mind-Sweeper machine, and he began to smile.

In the corridor outside the warehouse there was sudden noise. Men were running. The door burst open and three guards came in. Rand turned abruptly to face them.

"They escaped!" one of the guards cried.

Rand snapped, "Who escaped, you fool? Danton?"

"No, the two U.N.C.L.E. men. They're gone. We went to relieve the guards and we found them, the guards, locked in the room! The U.N.C.L.E. men overpowered them!"

Rand blinked. "Overpowered? Two against four with guns!? Do I have nothing but idiots here?"

The guards reddened. Rand watched them.

"No sign of them?"

"No, sir."

Rand nodded. "All right. They probably went out one of the loading ramps. Find them! They can't have gone far. Search the factory, just in case, and then search the countryside."

"Yes sir."

"Wait!" Rand said as the guards all turned to go. "In case they have escaped, institute Plan F. Immediately. We have no more reason to stay here anyway. You understand? Plan F. And notify Dr. Heimat below."

"Yes sir. Plan F. At once."

The guards all turned and ran from the room. Rand sat in the silence that descended and frowned. He looked again at his Mind-Sweeper machine.

That made him smile again. He stared at the machine like a father looking at a beautiful daughter.

"So, now we are about ready, my beauty," the slender, grey-haired man said out loud. "We will make history, you and I, eh? Heimat has you almost perfected; you will soon have brothers and sisters." Rand laughed a high, in sane laugh. "Yes, you and I will have power. Power and wealth. Who knows how far we will take each other?"

"Not too far, Rand," a voice said.

Rand whirled, his made eyes searching the shadows of the room.

Then he saw the figure in the white smock. There was a gun in the man's hand, and it was trained on Rand. The man stepped out of the shadows.

"Solo!" Rand breathed.

THREE

NAPOLEON SOLO smiled as he moved slowly and carefully toward the slender, grey-haired electronics man.

Solo and Illya had never left the room, but had blended into the shadows and had overheard the last part of the talk between Rand and Danton. They had lurked, waited, until Rand was alone in the room. Now Solo stepped out with his gun ready.

"Don't try anything, Rand," Solo said quietly.

Rand stared at the gun. "I have no desire to die, Mr. Solo. But what do you think you can do? My men have this place locked up. You can't escape."

"Neither can you," Solo said.

Rand did not flinch. "You plan to kill me?"

"If we have to."

"And destroy the machine?"

Solo nodded grimly. "And destroy the machine."

"You'll never survive," Rand said coldly.

"Maybe not, but you and the machine will go first."

Rand sneered. "What good will that do you? My men will still be here. Dr. Heimat will duplicate the machine. Don't be a fool, Solo. Destroy the machine and me and you throw away a fortune. You throw away the power to rule the world! Think of it!"

"I'm thinking of it," Solo said.

"Then join us! That's an offer. Leave U.N.C.L.E. and join with me. I can use your brains. Danton is right about one thing—there'll be a big risk, and I'll need an organization. You can be chief of our security organization. Think of it, Solo! Infinite money! Infinite power! Control of all the minds!"

"I can sometimes barely control my own mind," Solo said quietly. "Now, if you want to get out alive, I think you better call Dr. Heimat and get him up here."

Rand laughed. "Don't be a fool. You'll get nothing from me! You can't escape!"

"Illya," Solo said.

Rand blinked. He watched Solo and saw that the agent was looking over his own, Rand's, shoulder as he spoke. Rand turned to look behind him. His tanned face went bloodless.

Illya Kuryakin stood at the Mind-Sweeper machine. The small blond agent had his hands on switches. Kevin Rand tried to bluster.

"What do you think to do with the machine, Kuryakin?"

"Use it," Illya said quietly.

Rand sneered. "You think that you—"

"I am a trained electronics engineer, Rand," Illya said. "The machine is not too difficult. I don't expect any trouble. I suggest you relax."

Rand watched Illya. He glanced at Solo behind him. Then he made a desperate attempt. He bent, and came up from the desk with a pistol.

Solo leaped, kicked, and the pistol went sailing across the room.

The Mind-Sweeper began to hum. The tape spools turned. The lights began to flash. As the machine hummed, its probe was aimed directly at Rand. For an instant the slender man sat rigid. Then he began to blink, rub at his eyes, smile.

The machine hummed on, and Rand slowly began to nod where he sat. His arms dropped limp. Then he seemed to sleep.

Solo walked to the machine where Illya manipulated dials and switches. The computer section had begun to hum. Illya nodded at the machine.

"It really is a beautiful machine, Napoleon," Illya said. "It scans the brain, absorbs the data, records it on tape, and then feeds the tape into the small computer. In the computer the data is coded, and printed on a paper-tape read-out. The read-out tape can be stored, or it can be set for immediate read-out."

"Is it set?" Solo asked.

"Yes," Illya said. "We should know what is on Mr. Rand's mind any second."

The two agents bent over the tape. Solo watched the main door from time to time. The read-out tape began to come out of the machine. Illya Kuryakin studied it closely.

"This is the only model, but others are almost ready," Illya said. "They are all down in the factory we saw. This is Rand's only production center now."

The tape clicked on as the machine hummed and Rand sat slumped in his desk chair.

"He plans to operate the machines himself once he has ten models, and blackmail the whole world if he can," Illya read.

Rand squirmed in his chair, muttered, like a man in the throes of a bad dream.

Illya Kuryakin read, "Heimat is the only man who really can build the machine, and Rand himself can almost do it. Heimat's office is extension two thousand-seven-hundred and seventy, the code signal to make him come fast is the use of the words, 'There is no rush.' Heimat is a former Nazi scientist."

Solo held up his hand. Illya looked up. Far off, somewhere, there was a sound like gunfire.

The two agents looked at each other in the silent warehouse.

"It sounds like they think they've found us," Solo said. "Can you hurry that up?"

Illya read again. "Here it is! The outer-space defense system data is here in the machine memory banks, and Rand has it in his desk, but that's all!" Illya looked up. "Only the machine and Rand himself has the details. He has not passed it on yet."

"So all we need is Rand and the machine," Solo said.

"And Heimat," Illya said.

"Right. Let's get him up here," Solo said. "And fast. Someone will be coming in soon."

"Call Heimat imitating Rand's voice," Illya said.

Solo nodded and went to the desk where Rand still sat in a kind of drugged sleep, a smile on his face now as if all his evil thoughts had been taken and left him peaceful. Solo picked up the inter office telephone.

Illya continued to read the read-out tape of the machine that hummed on in the silence of the vast warehouse.

Solo imitated Rand's voice. "Dr. Heimat, extension two-thousand, seven-hundred and seventy. Heimat? I'd like to talk to you, yes. No, there is no rush. That's correct. Right."

Solo hung up. "He should be here pretty soon."

"Very soon, I hope." Illya said, his eyes still studying the read-out tape. "Plan F is—"

The distant shots suddenly sounded closer. Solo and Illya listened. Then there were hurrying footsteps in the corridor outside the warehouse. Solo jumped for the cover of a packing case. Illya crouched down behind the humming Mind-Sweeper, his pistol ready.

The door opened and a short, stocky man of sixty came hurrying into the vast room. The man had a full grey beard and the wild eyes of a fanatic. He saw Rand and walked rapidly toward the small executive.

"What the devil is it, Rand?" Heimat had a heavy German accent, and talked as he walked. "I have work. You have ordered Plan F, and you realize how much work that—"

Heimat stopped dead. His fanatic eyes bulged in his head. He saw the machine operating, and saw Rand slumped asleep in the desk chair. The small German whirled.

Solo stepped out. "That's far enough, Dr. Heimat."

Heimat turned away and saw Illya stand up behind the machine with the pistol leveled.

"*Was machts du*? Who are you? *Was wollen Sie hier*?"

"Just keep it low and simple, Doctor," Solo said.

Illya snapped an order in German. The stocky doctor paled, looked at Rand, looked around the silent room. Then he gulped.

"*Polizei*?"

"In a way we're police," Illya said. "Now keep it calm, and we'll all—"

In the corridor outside there were loud shots, screams, the running of many feet. Men cursed and sub-machine guns rattled. The running feet approached the door into the warehouse.

"Quick!" Illya cried.

Solo pushed Heimat ahead of him, toward a stack of heavy boxes along the far wall away from, the main door. Illya shut off the machine and ran after Solo. The two agents and Heimat jumped behind the boxes lust as the door burst open and men in black uniforms rushed in, their guns covering the whole room.

Illya and Solo watched.

Emil Danton strode into the room. The elegant THRUSH leader looked at Rand and laughed.

"Hello, Rand. It looks like my deal."

FOUR

DANTON STOOD IN front of Kevin Rand. The slender electronics expert blinked his eyes and shook his head as if not quite sure where he was or what was happening. He blinked up at Danton and seemed puzzled.

"Danton?"

The THRUSH leader laughed. "Myself. You made a mistake, Rand, as I told you you would. You see, my capture itself activated a device all THRUSH leaders carry. The device alerted my men outside to my capture and they called for help. We have an organization, as I tried to tell you. Now my men have your whole plant. I'm afraid quite a few of your men had to die. Too bad, but you should not have tangled with THRUSH. You're out of your depth, Rand."

"Danton?" Rand said. His eyes showed the battle going on in his brain to remember what was bothering him. He looked sharply at Danton. "But—but it wasn't you, no. It was—"

"You thought you had me, of course," Danton went on, "I tried to tell you that you were no match for THRUSH. Now I have your plant, and you. I will have the machine and Heimat, and all your facilities. I have them, Rand."

Rand nodded, his full consciousness returned. "Yes, so I see. But—Solo and that Russian. Where are they?"

Danton brushed this off. "I don't care about them now. The important matter is that you defied THRUSH, and you lost. I could kill you. But I would rather use you. You're beaten, Rand, and the Mind-Sweeper belongs to THRUSH. But we can use you, too."

Rand nodded again. "Why not? I know when I'm beaten. THRUSH appears to be all you say it is. I see no reason why I shouldn't join with you. Provided the terms are satisfactory."

"No terms, Rand," Danton said harshly. "You're in no position to make terms. I'm offering you a chance to join us, no more than that. You can be useful to us."

Rand watched Danton. "Very well."

"A wise decision," Danton said. and smiled. "Now let's get the machine and Heimat out of here. I don't like this place—too exposed and U.N.C.L.E. knows about it."

"Wait," Rand said. "I think I should be given a post of some authority in THRUSH, Danton, and for that I have something to give you."

"Give me?" Danton said.

Rand smiled. "Something quite important. Without it, you'll never leave this plant alive."

"What kind of a trick is this?" Danton snarled.

"No trick. I just need your word that I will have some rank in THRUSH."

"You want to die? If you have anything important to say, Rand, say it and without a deal."

Rand and Danton glared at each other. At last Rand sighed. He ran his thin fingers through his grey hair.

"Very well, an act of cooperation then. You see, I have to tell you that in my plan—"

Illya Kuryakin suddenly stood up from behind his boxes and shot three times at Rand.

Rand screamed once, hit by all three shots. The slender man pitched forward on to his face and lay still in a pool of spreading blood.

The room erupted with shots. Danton screamed orders to shoot Illya and Solo.

"Get them! There, behind those boxes!"

Behind the boxes Napoleon Solo sat on Dr. Heimat and fired from the cover of the heavy boxes. Illya fired. From their cover they picked off the THRUSH men like sitting ducks.

"Take cover!" Danton roared. All the THRUSH men dove for safety. Danton leaped behind a box. For a long and sudden minute all firing ceased as both sides crouched under cover.

Kevin Rand lay in his own blood between the two sides.

Danton peered over a box and called out.

"Come now, gentlemen. We have you outnumbered ten to one. You know you don't have a chance. Solo? Kuryakin?"

"Come and get us, Danton," Solo called out. Heimat squirmed under him. Solo grinned.

"We'll simply outflank you, Solo," Danton said.

"Go ahead," Solo called back.

"Do you think you know some thing I don't know?" Danton said.

"Come and see," Solo said.

He looked down at Heimat beneath him. Danton would not want to hurt Heimat. Illya Kuryakin was watching the hidden enemy.

"So?" Danton said. "Very well. We don't need you, do we? I suppose you have help on the way. It will do you no good. I have enough men in the plant. From where you are you can't cover the machine. My men will simply pin you down, and we will take the machine and go."

"What about Heimat?" Illya called.

There was a long silence. Danton crouched behind his box.

"I see," Danton said at last. "You have Heimat, eh? Well, I suppose we'll have to make a deal. What do you say…"

Behind the boxes Illya Kuryakin suddenly touched Napoleon Solo. "Down!"

Solo looked at the small Russian.

"Down, now!" Illya cried.

Solo dropped. He lay flat with his hands over his head. Illya lay beside him. Dr. Heimat did not even attempt to escape. Illya was looking at his watch.

Danton called. "Well? What deal would you—"

First the concrete floor seemed to rise up.

Then the roof beams buckled, sagged.

The earth seemed to rock like a ship at sea.

Then the explosion shook the entire building to its core.

Beams fell, the floor heaved, men were thrown everywhere.

Screams came from all through the plant outside the warehouse. Flames began to flicker at the windows.

Explosions and shock waves shuddered through the plant and the night.

The THRUSH men ran in confusion, screamed, shouted. Boxes tumbled onto men all through the warehouse. Debris showered down on Solo and Illya.

FIVE

BUT THERE HAD been no explosion in the warehouse.

The building shook and rocked and cracked but this was from the explosions in the other parts of the plant. Flames filled the night sky outside the warehouse, but in the warehouse itself there was no explosion or fire, only the results of near explosions, and the smoke of close fire.

Danton shouted. "It's a destruct! But not in here! Grab the machine! Quickly now!"

Chaos and confusion filled the warehouse. Illya and Solo stood up. They hauled Heimat to his feet. They began to move across the warehouse, their guns ready.

THRUSH men saw them. "There! U. N. C.L.E.!"

Illya and Solo shot, staggered on across the broken floor among the chaos of men and littered boxes.

"Forget them!" Danton screamed. "The machine! Get the machine out! Hurry! Watch them, but get the machine!"

Firing as they went, Illya and Solo moved toward the door through the smoke and confusion. The door was blocked by fallen beams. Illya and Solo turned toward the outer loading doors. Some of the heavy double doors stood shattered and open to the night that was bright with flame.

"The machine!" Danton shouted. "You fools, get the machine! Hurry"

With a curse, Danton ran to the machine himself. He grabbed other THRUSH men and forced them to take hold of the Mind-Sweeper. They worked like smoke-blackened demons around the malignant machine, bent, took hold, strained to raise it.

Illya and Solo ran with Heimat toward the open loading doors at the far end. Suddenly Heimat looked back and saw Danton give the order to lift the Mind-Sweeper.

The stocky German fell to the floor.

Illya and Solo bent to pick him up.

The explosion ripped through the warehouse itself.

The Mind-Sweeper, the THRUSH men lifting it, and Emil Danton seemed to vanish in a sheet of flame.

One instant Danton was there with his arms out in an order to lift the Mind-Sweeper, and the next instant he was a shattered corpse in the twisted and

broken metal of the exploded machine.

In the explosion, Illya and Solo were knocked flat. They lay stunned. All through the room—a shambles now—THRUSH men lay groaning on the floor.

Illya and Solo staggered up.

Heimat was gone.

"There!" Illya shouted.

Heimat was running some fifty yards ahead and almost at the doors out.

"He knew the machine would explode!" Illya cried.

"Come on!" Solo shouted.

"We've got to get him!" Illya cried.

They ran after the stocky German. They reached the doors and ran on out into the night. Heimat was still some fifty yards ahead running toward the woods. He turned and saw them gaining on him. He was an old man and they could easily outrun him.

Heimat turned and raced as fast as he could back toward the buildings of the plant that burned fiercely in the night.

"If he gets away we can still lose it all!" Solo panted as he ran.

"Head him off," Illya gasped.

They gained, but they were still some twenty-five yards behind the fleeing scientist when the ground suddenly rose up and seemed to enfold Heimat like a great mouth eating him. He rose into the air and for a long second his feet continued to move, his legs pumping madly as he ran on empty air.

Illya and Solo were flung down again.

The explosion tore up out of the bowels of the earth itself.

Heimat hung there, still trying to run suspended in mid-air, and then he fell screaming into the yawning pit of flames that came from below where the underground rooms had exploded in the final holocaust of the plant.

Illya and Solo lay where they were for a moment. Ten yards in front of them a great hole had opened in the ground and the flames licked up into the darkness. They stood up, battered and bruised but unhurt.

They looked around them. Flames burned everywhere. The entire plant was a shattered hulk. But there were no more explosions.

The darkness was almost dead in its silence.

Only the small sound of flames, and the faint screams of the injured.

Dawn was beginning to break in the east.

SIX

ALEXANDER WAVERLY sat in his helicopter on the edge of the field. Police and firemen swarmed over the still blazing wreckage of the plant in the distance. A thin sun had just risen over the eastern edge of the world. Illya and Solo, patched and bandaged but still black with smoke and charred wood, stood in front of the U.N.C.L.E. helicopter.

"Well, it seems the affair is ended," Waverly said, "and quite satisfactorily. Good work, gentlemen."

"Thank you," Illya said.

Waverly rubbed his hands. "I'm afraid it is all gone. The machine, Rand, Heimat, the plans, all the facilities. We will never have the secret of the—uh—Mind-Sweeper. But perhaps that is just as well. Rand had a most complete destruct mechanism in the plant. I imagine he expected to be far away when it went off."

The three U.N.C.L.E. men looked away toward the ruin of the plant and the firemen picking hopelessly among the wreckage. Men with stretchers were still carrying away the few survivors of the plant personnel, Rand's gang, and THRUSH's small army. Solo looked at Illya.

"One thing I don't get, Illya," Solo said. "Why did you stand up and shoot Rand? They didn't even know we were there."

"Plan F," Illya said. "I read it on the tape read-out from the machine. Rand's mind told me what Plan F was. It was the destruct. It also booby-trapped the Mind-Sweeper."

"But—" Solo began.

"I knew the machine was booby-trapped. As soon as Plan F was activated, Napoleon, the machine could not be moved without exploding, except by Rand, who could disconnect the explosive device. I knew when he started to tell Danton something, that what he was going to tell Danton was that the machine could not be moved, and that the plant would blow up."

Waverly nodded. "I see. So you stopped Rand from telling Danton. Clever. By shooting Rand, you prevented Danton from knowing that the machine would explode."

Illya Kuryakin nodded. "I had no way of being sure that Napoleon and I would get out alive. So I had to prevent Danton from knowing that the machine would explode if he moved it. That way, even if we were dead, Danton would not get the machine."

Waverly sucked on his cold pipe and looked again at the shattered plant that seemed to glow in the sun.

"The Mind-Sweeper is destroyed, and we got Danton, too," Waverly said slowly, and smiled. "A very good piece of work, indeed. An excellent night's work. Naturally, we will make no report about this, or Forsyte, or any of them. They were not spies. And you're sure that the outer-space defense data is completely destroyed?"

"Only Kevin Rand and the machine had the data," Solo said.

"Excellent," Waverly said, and looked at the sun, clear and gold above the eastern horizon. "It looks like a nice day. I suggest you gentlemen take the rest of the day, and get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow, I think we have another small problem for you to tackle."

With a sigh, Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin climbed into the helicopter. Moments later it was on its way back to U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters.

The shattered ruin of Rand Electronics smoldered behind.